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The Gold Witch's Shadower. By Col. P. Ingraham.



PRESENTLY HE HALTED AND SAID ALOUD: "SHE HAS TAKEN THIS CANYON AND WE CAN HEAD HER OFF AT THE OTHER END."

THE Gold Witch's Shadower;

OR,

The Lone Mascot of Deadman's Den.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE GOLD WITCH.

A MAN was slowly following a trail along a wild canyon in the mountains of Colorado.

He was well mounted and armed, and before his horse trotted a dog which he seemed to place as much confidence in as a trailer as he did in himself.

The man was a fine-looking, muscular young fellow, with an honest face, deeply bronzed, bearing the look of fearlessness of one who had passed his life upon the border.

Presently he halted and said aloud, as though speaking to his horse and dog:

"She has taken this canyon, so we can head her off at the other end and get a good look at her."

Turning from the trail, he went off at a gallop down the valley.

He kept this pace up for several miles; then, turning into a canyon penetrating a rocky ridge, he came out on the other side of a range just where a large canyon running from the northward cut across the trail.

There he halted for a rest, watered his horse from a brook near and staked him out to feed, while he prepared some food for himself.

This occupied an hour, when he again mounted, riding toward the canyon before alluded to.

The horseman had not gone very far when he suddenly drew rein with the exclamation:

"There she comes! and isn't she a darling!"

The one referred to came in sight, but it was hard to decide at a glance just who or what she was.

She was mounted upon a splendid animal, as black as ink, but which was without a bridle. Merely a lariat encircled his neck, one end being coiled and hung over the horn of a very odd-looking side-saddle.

In front of this horse trotted a large blood-hound, some fifty paces ahead, and which came to a halt with a savage growl as the horseman came into view.

Behind her followed a horse as white as snow—a splendid animal, with a lariat only about his neck, and carrying a large pack covered over with an india-rubber wrapper.

Upon this pack sat a crow and a parrot, apparently enjoying their ride, while a black cat lay coiled up in the center, fast asleep.

Behind the horse was a huge dog—a short, savage-looking brute, indeed.

But, the owner of this strange outfit?

It was a woman, evidently. Her years were perhaps fifty; her face was darkly bronzed and her hair, iron-gray, fell far down her back in heavy masses.

Her eyes were dark and piercing, and upon her face was an expression of cruelty and cunning combined.

She wore a cavalry officer's slouch hat encircled by a stuffed snake to serve as a cord and with a red plume in it, while the brim was looped up with an ivory pin representing a human skull.

A soldier's coat, with epaulettes, a blood-red velvet skirt, cavalry top-boots with spurs of gold, a sash, and belt of arms completed her attire, while she carried in her hand a long staff, on one end of which was a small scythe as sharp as a razor, and on the other end a saber bayonet.

With this staff she directed the movements of her horses.

When she beheld the horseman ahead, she said something to the dog, when he at once trotted on as though content with having given his warning growl of possible danger ahead.

The young horseman had now halted, and seemed willing to await the coming of the strange woman and her cavalcade.

As she drew near she halted also, waved her staff several times around her head and saluted in a voice almost startling in its rich, musical tone:

"Good-morning, friend."

"Good-morning, madam!" and the horseman politely raised his hat.

"You have been well raised, man, to salute a lady politely."

"Which way do you travel?"

"Eastward, to the Bronx settlement."

"Art acquainted there?"

"No, madam," and the horseman coughed, as though trying to keep the fib he told from choking him.

"I left there yesterday morning, or rather passed through the Bronx Valley."

"Maybe you know some one there, for I am going to the Dudley Ranch to get a place as cowboy."

"The Dudley Ranch?"

"Yes, madam."

"It is now owned by other people."

"Yes; I heard that Mr. Sloan had bought it."

"Your Mister Sloan is Dare Sloan—as yet only a boy. It was his mother who bought the place. Do you know them?"

"I met Mr. Sloan last year when he was hunting on the plains. I was his guide, and he stopped at my ranch for a couple of months."

"But the Indians ran off my cattle, and as I am in hard luck, I was going to see if I could get a cowboy's place with him."

"Well, he's in hard luck, too, for a bank has failed that had his money in it, and a rascally agent who had the Sloan place, in the East, to sell, ran off with the money, so the farm and ranch they bought in the Bronx Valley they can't pay for, and you'll not get work."

"My, but that's bad for me, for I need work awful, and I don't know just what to do," and the cowboy looked unutterably sad.

"What's your name?" asked the strange woman.

"Buck Brandon, madam."

"I was a Government scout at Fort Bridger, and afterward at McPherson; but I laid up my money and went to ranchin', as I told you."

"Why don't you try the mines?"

"Do you think there's money in it?"

"I know it, for I'm from Colorado."

"Are you mining?" asked the cowboy, with a look of surprise.

"Mining? No! I'm a witch!" was the calm reply.

The cowboy started and looked uneasy.

"I'm called the Gold Witch, young man, for I can tell when there's gold in the ground by touching it with my staff here."

"I'm a fortune-teller, and that's how I knew all about your friends, the Sloans."

"But I've got a mine down in Colorado, and the miners come to me when they wish to strike it rich."

"You go there, for I tell you there's money ahead for you, if the Sloans can do nothing for you."

"Go down to Deadman's Den, as they call the Valley Camps, and you'll get work, if it is work you want."

"Go, I say! When I command, I must be obeyed. Disobey, and I'll curse you!"

The woman seemed to be suddenly working herself into a temper, and this mood became infectious, for the two horses neighed, the dogs howled, the raven croaked, the parrot shrieked, and the cat seated on the pack humped its back and growled, while the

Gold Witch pointed with her strange staff directly at the cowboy, who at once shrunk as in terror from her.

"I'll go," he cried, and wheeling his horse he dashed rapidly away down the canyon.

But he soon turned about, watched for awhile to see the woman pass, and then took her trail, following it doggedly for many a long mile.

The next day looking very much the worse for a hard ride, and with his horse nearly worn out, he rode up to a ranch and was at once greeted by a handsome woman of forty, who asked eagerly:

"Did you track her, Brandon?"

"I headed her off, Mrs. Sloan, had a talk with her, and she ordered me to go to the mining-camps to find work, for I told her I was coming here to seek a place as herder."

"I started for the camps, as she commanded, but dogged her to Deadman's Den mining-camps, and found out that she has a mine in Echo Canyon, living far away from any one else, and is known as the 'Gold Witch.'"

"You have done well, Brandon; but now I have bad news to tell you, for my son writes that the bank has failed where I had my funds, and that we are ruined."

"I shall pay you your money, for I must now give up this place, and find a home elsewhere."

"You return to your old ranch, and when I need you, and need you I shall, I will know where to find you."

CHAPTER II.

SEPARATE WAYS.

Two men had gone into camp on the bank of the Platte River, at a point where one trail led to the further West, the Overland trail to California, and the other to the Southwest along the banks of the South Platte.

They found for themselves a good camping-ground, where water and grass were in plenty, and as at their saddle-horns hung plenty of game, their repast was likely to be luxurious.

The men rode fine animals, that appeared to possess speed and endurance combined in a remarkable degree, and their equipments of saddles and bridles apparently were quite new, as though not very long in use.

The horses were staked out, coffee-pot and frying-pan were taken from the traps and a fire built.

Potatoes were put in the fire to roast, water brought from the river, coffee made and a hoe-cake, and the two sat down to a very substantial supper.

They seemed to enjoy their meal, chatted pleasantly, then threw up a brush shelter and gathered logs for a fire for the night.

As they sat there in the glare of the fire, light their faces and forms were clearly revealed.

One was of short stature, with a wiry form, an honest, resolute face, and about thirty years of age.

He was dressed in a hunter's suit, top-boots and broad sombrero, and wore a belt of arms.

His companion was tall, elegantly formed for both symmetrical grace and strength. He was attired in a corduroy suit, top-boots, gray slouch hat and was well armed.

His face was of refined mold, his features as perfect as a woman's, and full of fearlessness, intelligence and decision.

Both men were beardless—the elder appearing to have totally shaven off a beard, while the tall young man's upper lip showed traces of a mustache that had been sacrificed from some cause.

"Well, Dick, to-morrow we part, and I assure you it will be a sad parting to me. Never can I forget from what you saved me my good friend—a death of infamy upon the gallows!"

And a shudder passed over the form of the young man as he spoke.

"I was but an instrument, Dare, for the

genius and the plotter was a woman, beautiful as an angel, God bless her!"

"So say I, for she did save me, with your aid."

"How brave she was to come to the jail, pretending to be my mother, and I did not know the contrary until she drew her deep mourning veil back and showed me the lovely face of Miss Dangerfield."

"You know it was my good fortune to save her life on two separate occasions, and, feeling that I was innocent of the crime of which I was accused, she determined to act."

"I have before told you how surprised I was when she handed out files, a rope, slouch hat, beard and wig, and told me to make my escape that night and go to the gate, where I would meet one who would lead me to safety."

"And that one was myself, Dare, who also can never forget how, the day of the freshet, you risked your life and saved mine."

"She sent for me, when she learned I was night gate-keeper at the jail, and offered me a bribe of five thousand dollars, while she told me that, under oath, she could assert your innocence, and asked me to help you, as I had no family to hold me there."

"I told her that I also believed you innocent, so would act on that idea, and not for a bribe. I had some thousands laid by, so would give her a check for it, if she would give me the money on it, as, after the escape, I would not dare go near the bank in the city to draw out what I had there."

"This she did, and then she bade me give you the package of twenty-five hundred dollars, telling you to take it as a loan."

"Well, you escaped, met me, and we got away together, I in the disguise that Miss Dangerfield had bought for me, and I made a pretty good-looking woman, didn't I?"

"You did indeed, Dick."

"And you looked well in your white wig and spectacles, Dare."

"Yes, I almost felt like an old man, after going bent over for a week, and it is hard now to keep from calling you daughter," and both laughed at the remembrance.

"Well, we escaped, Dick, and I wrote Miss Dangerfield from Omaha, where we changed our characters, for there is no fear of detection now."

"No, not now."

"And here we part, for I must go on up to the ranch of my friend Buck Brandon, where my letter, left at our former home, told me I would learn of my mother's whereabouts."

"You still think you cannot go with me?"

"I think it best by far that we should separate, for it will be safer for both of us."

"I will ride on to-morrow to the North Platte settlement, and there selling my horse, will take the Overland coach for San Francisco, and from thence go up to the Northwest, in Washington Territory, I guess, and go into business; but I will write you under cover to your friend Brandon, of just what I am doing."

"And I know not what I shall do until I see my mother."

"Of course I am anxious to prove that I am not the murderer of poor old Squire Benson; but that must be done through others, not myself, as the risk of being retaken is too great."

"You have been a true friend to me, Richard Doyle, in the six weeks we have been together, fugitives from the law, and I hope some day we may meet again," and Dare Sloan spoke with deep feeling.

"We will, Dare, and I venture to predict you will yet be proven innocent, although sentenced under circumstantial evidence that would have hanged any man."

Thus the two friends, the fugitive from the

gallows and the night-watchman at the prison who had aided his escape, talked on until late into the night, when they retired to their blankets.

But they were up at sunrise, had a good breakfast, and then parted with many expressions of regret and friendship.

While Richard Doyle went on his way to where he could take the Overland stage—then the only passenger service to the Pacific Coast—Dare Sloan, who had before been in that part of the country on a camp hunt of several months, followed the trail which he knew would lead him to the ranch of Buck Brandon, who had been his guide and hunter on the occasion referred to, and afterward had been employed on the Sloan Ranch in Iowa.

CHAPTER III.

THE COWBOY AT HOME.

BUCK BRANDON sat in front of his little cabin-home enjoying his pipe after a late dinner, for he had just come from a day's hunt after game.

He was a fine-looking young fellow, who had saved up his money when a Government scout at Fort McPherson and Fort Bridger, and after "Homesteading" a place in Nebraska, had bought more land until he was master of a couple of thousand acres.

He had selected the spot for his future home when scouting, and had chosen well.

Often he had gone there at different times and done a little work, cutting out timber for a log-cabin and fences, and at last, when he had turned ranchero, he had speedily erected his house, put up fences about a garden plot and field, and then went after his cattle.

He had started well, and his ranch was frequently the resort of hunters and officers who wished to hunt, and thus had Dare Sloan gone there with a young lieutenant from the fort.

When the Indians ran off Buck Brandon's cattle and ponies, he had shut up his cabin and gone Eastward to earn more money with which to start anew, and had come one night to a ranch, which, to his delight, he found was owned by Dare Sloan and his mother.

He had at once accepted the position of herder for the ranch, and held that position as has been recorded, when news came that took Dare Sloan to the East, where he so nearly came to a sad end at the hands of the hangman.

Of the breaking up of her home by Widow Sloan, and her departure for parts unknown, the reader already has been informed.

Buck Brandon had taken what money he had, and which Mrs. Sloan had paid him for his special trailing of the Gold Witch, and purchasing half-a-dozen ponies and a hundred head of cattle had returned to his ranch to once more start out to make a fortune and become a cattle king.

To his delight he found his cabin had not been destroyed, and the things he had cached were safe and sound, so he quickly had all to rights once more; and, as the Indians had been driven further away, he had little fear of another visit from them.

So, though alone in his far-away ranch, fifty miles distant from his nearest neighbors, he seemed perfectly content.

He had brought with him on his ponies ample provisions and stores for the winter, and was preparing game to put away, while he had piled up large quantities of wood about his cabin, to keep him warm when the icy winds should blow.

His cabin was at the head of a valley, with high hills and timber sheltering it from the north winds, and there was grass in abundance, with a brook running by his door.

Sheds were there for the cattle should heavy snows fall, and the lone cowboy felt

that he was prepared against every and any emergency.

His cattle sought the shelter of the valley by night, so were of little trouble, while by day they fed along the river-bottoms and out over the prairies.

It was while contemplating his comfort and prosperity, that he sat enjoying his pipe, when suddenly he was startled by a loud halloo, at which he sprung to his feet to behold a horseman approaching.

He had his rifle handy, and waited, for in that wild and then remote land he knew that he might find a foe in the stranger even sooner than a friend, for lawless men then, as now, were the dread and curse of the settler.

"Ho, Buck! bow are you?" called out the horseman as he approached.

"Dare Sloan, by the great grizzlies of the Rockies!" cried Brandon, and he hastily went forward to greet his visitor.

After his horse was staked out, and Buck had set about getting something to eat for his guest, Dare asked:

"Well, what news, pard?"

"I guess you know it all, Pard Dare, for there is little I can tell you more than that your mother got your telegram and at once sold out and quit."

"And where gone?"

"There's a letter here for you may tell you, but I don't know," and he got the letter.

"Yes, I found a line at the ranch telling me to come to you, and here I am; but my mother did not get my letters, it seems, as they were at the ranch."

"No, for she left at once after receiving your telegram, and I was mighty sorry to hear of your hard luck, Pard Dare, for it's hard to lose one's fortune as I know, be it big or little."

"Thank you, Buck; but for myself I do not care, as I am young and can rough it, though it is hard to see my mother come to almost want."

"So it is; but you read your letter, and I'll go on with my cooking."

So Dare Sloan broke the seal to his mother's letter and read:

"MY DEAR SON:—

"Your telegram warns me that we have nothing to expect—in fact, that we are little better than beggars, for all we can realize from the sale of what is really our own will not amount to two thousand dollars."

"I therefore, while you linger in the East to see if aught can be gained from the wreck, will undertake to find a new home and occupation here."

"I have not decided upon my course, but I have a chance, I think, of doing something that may bring us riches yet."

"I leave this letter in the hands of Buck Brandon, who has proven our faithful friend; so when you reach his ranch, await there until you hear from me, as I will write a letter to the ex-scout to Fort McPherson, as he is known there, and they can direct my courier how to find his ranch."

"Do not, therefore, leave Brandon's ranch until you hear from me, even should it not be for months."

"With every hope for our prosperous future, and all good wishes for yourself,

"Your attached

"MOTHER."

Such was the letter, and by it Dare Sloan knew that she had not heard one word of his danger of being hanged in N—as a murderer!

"I am glad of it—glad, now, that she failed to get either my letters or telegrams, for by not doing so she has been saved so much of anxiety and heartache."

"But, where can she have gone?"

"She speaks of having an idea: yet Buck can tell me nothing about it."

"I will question him further, for this sus-

pense regarding my poor dear mother is by no means pleasant.

"I say, Buck?"

"Yes, Pard Dare."

"My mother gives me no clue as to where she has gone, or as to her purpose, in this letter, so I must see if we cannot put our heads together and find out."

"I'll do all I can to help you, pard."

"I know that; but she says I am to wait here until she sends a courier to Fort McPherson to find you, and he will bring me a letter, through you, telling me what to do."

"That's good, for I'll have your company some time yet."

"I do not care, for certain reasons, to remain here too long, Buck, for I am known to think highly of you, and you may be looked up and asked about me."

"And what then?"

"The truth is, Buck, I got into a terrible trouble East, for a man was killed and I was suspected, though I pledge you my word I was not guilty."

"Now, I had no desire to hang for another man's crime, so came West with all speed."

"I understand, pard, and you were right to do so; but no one will ever get any news out o' me regarding you. I'm dumb as a jack-rabbit."

"I know that, Buck; but I could be very content here if I only knew just what had become of my mother."

"Oh, she's all right, for, pard, she's one to take care of herself under any and all circumstances."

"Why, she's all business, and don't you forget it, and she's no more acquainted with what fear is than—than—well, I may say you are, and that's saying a great deal, for I do think you have got more quiet nerve than falls to a man's lot often."

"Well, I have had a chance to test my nerves of late that I hope never to go through again, Buck," and Dare Sloan shuddered at the thought of how near he had been to the hangman's rope.

"I don't doubt it, pard; but now you wish to know all I can tell you about your mother, so we'll chat it over while you eat your grub, for I know you are hungry."

"I am, indeed, as I had an early breakfast and have been ten hours steady on the trail."

CHAPTER IV.

THE COWBOY'S STORY.

DARE SLOAN did not care to make more known than he had to, about himself and his trouble, to the cowboy.

That Buck Brandon was true as steel he well knew, but he did not care to burden him with any secret that might be disagreeable to keep, should the rancher be called upon to tell what he knew about his friend and guest.

He only hoped to hear soon from his mother, that he might join her and the two seek a hiding-place far away, and free from all possible danger of discovery or capture.

He well understood that his mother, for some reason always kept from him, was ready to go anywhere away from civilization, so there would be no trouble about her when she knew that her son's life depended upon the security of their hiding-place.

"Well, Pard Dare, I must tell you from the first, and I've had no word not to do so," began Buck, the cowboy, when Dare Sloan had finished his supper and lighted his cigar.

It was dark now and growing chilly.

The ponies and cattle had all come into the valley for the night, Buck's chickens, of which he had brought a dozen, had gone to roost, and the fire on the cabin hearth burned brightly.

Buck had accepted a cigar from Dare, but

said that he preferred a pipe, and really did so.

Still, he said that he could talk better with a cigar than a pipe, and so lighted it and began his story.

"Soon after you left, young pard, there came to the ranch the queerest-looking creature I ever set eyes on."

"She was a woman, with gray hair, dressed up in a military coat, a sombrero with a rattlesnake for a cord, and a skull of ivory for a pin to hold up the brim."

"She had a red-velvet skirt on, top-boots with spurs, and she was a woman to be scared of, and no mistake."

"A belt-of-arms, a long staff, with a crooked knife on one end and a bayonet on t'other, with a rifle, completed her armament, and she looked loaded for bear, I can tell you."

"But, that wasn't all, Pard Dare, for her outfit beat her own looks."

"She had two as fine horses as I ever saw, one white, one black, and rode the black one without a bridle."

"The white horse she used for a pack-animal, and the black beauty she rode."

"Then there was a pair of the cussedest-looking dogs I ever put eyes on, with a cat that was black as midnight, and a crow—think of that! a regular croaking crow! and a parrot that could cuss and pray in chorus with himself."

"She had a regular tent, and all to make her comfortable, and she went into camp in the valley near your ranch, and after dark waltzed up to see your mother."

"To see my mother?" repeated Dare, in amazement.

"She did, for a fact; and they seemed to be acquainted, though your ma was not pleased by her visit, I judge, for, when the queer customer left she told me she would give me five hundred dollars to go on the old hag's trail and find her den."

"Maybe you know her, pard?"

"I haven't the slightest idea of who the creature can be."

"But, did you go?"

"I did, and I tracked her down in Colorado."

"To Colorado?"

"True; and found that she lives in a mining settlement, or near one they call Deadman's Den."

"What does she do there?"

"Mines and fortune-tells, with a look around to find gold for the boys, now and then."

"And what did she go to my home for?"

"I am sure she went there to see your mother, only."

"You do not know what passed between them?"

"Not a word."

"And you told my mother where the woman stopped?"

"I did; and she paid me the money, though I did not wish to take it; but she said I must, and it was that which set me up in ranchin' again, along with what I had."

"You were right to take it, Buck, for if you accomplished what you went for, you earned it."

"Well, I made up my mind when I did, if you and your ma had luck go against you, and wanted a home, this would be yours as much as mine."

"You are a good fellow, Pard Buck; but which way did my mother go after leaving the ranch?"

"She took the Overland coach further west, but I don't know where she went, and she only said she would send word to you here at my ranch."

Dare Sloan could not understand all that he had heard of this strange woman-caller on his mother.

He could not think who she could be, and what interest she held in his mother, or she

in the stranger, that had caused the visit; and then, the sending of Buck Brandon to trail the strange creature to her home!

"I can only wait, Buck, until I hear from my mother; and Heaven grant no harm has befallen her!" he said, as the two prepared to turn in for the night, for, having completed his journey, his destination being the cowboy's home, the fugitive felt the wear and tear of all he had gone through with more than he cared to admit, even to himself.

CHAPTER V.

A BITTER BLOW.

Now let us go back a little, in the order of time, not to account for the presence, at Buck Brandon's ranch, of Dare Sloan, nor to reveal the previous history of the mysteriously absent mother of the young man and the strange relations which she evidently was forced to hold with the Witch: all these facts will develop in the due progress of this disclosure.

We go back to Daisy Dell Manor, the home of Darke Dangerfield and his beautiful daughter Anita, in Central New York—the Miss Dangerfield of Chapter II, by whose remarkable intercession and sacrifices, made in her father's absence and wholly without his knowledge, Dare Sloan had escaped the gallows.

Darke Dangerfield, returning unexpectedly after a long absence in Colorado, where he had experienced heavy temporary losses, learned from Anita of the disgrace brought upon them by the son and brother, and had promptly discarded and disowned the recreant and criminal.

The knowledge of it all hurt the proud man to the heart, and added still another sorrow to the calendar of his miseries; for he had shot and killed, in self-defense, his neighbor, Henry Sloan—the husband of Dora Dean, the woman to whom the aristocratic Dangerfield had once been engaged but had jilted, in order to marry a great heiress.

This killing of her husband had turned the vials of Dora's wrath against Dangerfield and his rich wife, and transformed her once mild and beautiful nature into that of a most dangerous enemy; and she had fled from the consequences of a terrible crime to the West, where, on a ranch in Northwestern Iowa, she had hoped to bide in peace, with her only child—Dare Sloan.

But, as we have seen, it was a false hope, for there the mysterious Gold Witch found her, and on that discovery turns the dark drama of this story.

Darke Dangerfield, hurt in fortune and pride, now determined to retire to his Daisy Dell Manor estate, unhappily associated as it was with the slaying of his neighbor, Sloan; and, by good management of the big farm and that of an adjoining farm known as Elmwood, to regain somewhat of his losses.

So the town house and its fine furniture were sold, and to the manor father and daughter retired.

This was the situation when, one morning, a town carriage drove up to the manor-house door and from it a stranger dismounted.

He had the air of a business man, and the card he sent in to Darke Dangerfield bore on it:

"FRANK STONE,

Attorney-at-law."

Darke Dangerfield entered the room with surprise to know what his visitor could want.

He owed not a dollar in the world, and owned the Dell estate, while Elmwood farm, which he was working, belonged to the old friend of the Sloan family, Judge Verdan, and so no legal matters were outstanding against him, and he naturally thought:

He has come on account of that wicked boy, Dean, I feel certain."

Lawyer Stone greeted the master of Daisy Dell pleasantly, and Darke Dangerfield saw at once that his visitor was a gentleman and possessed a very pleasant manner.

"My visit to you, Mr. Dangerfield, I regret to say, is an unpleasant one, for it bodes you no good," said Mr. Stone.

Darke Dangerfield merely bowed and nerved himself to hear the worst.

"I am the attorney, sir," continued the lawyer, "of the Benson estate, that is, of the property left by the murdered Squire Benson."

"Yes, sir."

"Now Squire Benson, you remember, was murdered by a distant kinsman, so the evidence showed, by the name of Dare Sloan."

"I remember, sir."

"The squire was known to be a very rich man, yet no one suspected his wealth to be one-tenth of what it really is."

"He was a quiet man in his way, an old bachelor, and lived in a rookery several miles from here."

"His nearest relative was a lady by the name of Dora Dean, afterward the wife of a farmer, Henry Sloan. She was Squire Benson's first cousin."

"And, may I ask, sir, in what way do I hold interest in Squire Benson's will and kindred?" asked Darke Dangerfield somewhat impatiently.

"I am coming to your interest in the case in good time, Mr. Dangerfield; but I wished you to understand just how matters legally stand, so that all will be of easy comprehension."

"Now, Squire Benson left in his will all property belonging to him, to the very man who is said to have taken his life—Dare Sloan, his second cousin and the son of Dora Sloan, who was Dora Dean."

"He made his will in favor of this young man, 'then in parts unknown,' so the will read, but who was to be looked up by his executors, and the fortune given entire into his keeping."

"If not found in five years, then the property was to go to founding and endowing a charity hospital in, or near N—."

"If his heir was dead, the property was to go to the same object, less a certain sum in bank, which was to go to the support of his cousin, Dora Sloan, provided she had not married again; and in case of her marriage or death, it was to go to charity."

"This does not interest me in the least, sir," said Darke Dangerfield, severely.

"Now, sir, I come to a part that will interest you, and, I regret, not pleasantly."

"In his will, Squire Benson left a perfect list of all of his riches, real estate, and personal, and moneyed, and he also made a confession."

"That confession was regarding his brother, who died, a few months after the squire's murder, in the West, and so is now beyond the reach of the law."

"This brother, so reads the confession, forged certain deeds and papers, claiming to hold the Daisy Dell tract of land, then, also, including the estate of Elmwood Hall, as well as other lands in and around the town of N— and thus covering the farm of the father of Dora Dean, Ezra Dean."

"This forgery of title left the mother and daughter of Ezra Dean penniless, as it were, and the wife of Ezra dying soon after, Dora was alone in the world, and married Henry Sloan, whose father, it seems, had also, by forged papers, secured possession of Elmwood Hall."

"Now, old Mr. Sloan was as innocent as a child in the matter, and, like Ezra Dean, was in the power of this now dead forger, Rufus Benson, the brother of the old squire."

"The squire's weakness was his love for his rascally brother, and he always protected him in his acts, though never knowing until he had Rufus Benson's dying confession that he was really criminal in his deeds."

"Then he tried to make amends all in his power by naming the son of Dora Dean his heir, and, by a strange judgment, he was assassinated by his heir, who now, a fugitive from the gallows, cannot enjoy his vast estates."

"But my claim upon Daisy Dell?" huskily asked Darke Dangerfield.

"You have no claim upon it, I regret to say, for the sale to you was a fraud," was the low but distinct response of the lawyer.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAWYER'S REVELATION.

FOR a long while the lawyer spoke no word, for he saw that Darke Dangerfield fully comprehended the situation.

And Darke Dangerfield certainly did comprehend that he had married an heiress to, in the end, come down to poverty, while the woman he had given up, Dora Dean, was now the mother of a son who, did he dare come to claim his inheritance, was tenfold richer than he, Dangerfield, had ever dreamed of being!

At length he rose and said:

"Mr. Stone, I think I understand the situation, but I wish my daughter to hear all you have said, and more that I would learn from you."

"Certainly, Mr. Dangerfield; and I am pained to have to tell her bad news."

Darke Dangerfield went for his daughter, and finding her among her flowers, said:

"Anita, my child, come with me, for I have a visitor, a lawyer, who has certainly brought us most unwelcome information."

"Brother Dean?" cried Anita.

"It is not of that scamp: it concerns ourselves, you and I, so prepare to hear bad news."

"I am ready, sir," was the calm response, and Anita accompanied her father into the library.

"My daughter, Mr. Stone," and the lawyer bowed low, struck with the exquisite beauty of the maiden he had to wound.

Anita returned his salutation and took a seat near, while she said:

"My father tells me, sir, that you have bad news for us."

"I am sorry to say I have, Miss Dangerfield," and he went on to tell her just what he had made known to her father.

"And may I ask, sir, how this interests us?" she asked.

"The assumed sale of Daisy Dell, and of Elmwood, by Mr. Ezra Dean and Henry Sloan, Sr., to Rufus Benson, was a forgery, for both men died at the same time, or within a few days of each other, while the wife of Henry Sloan, Sr., was dead, and Mrs. Ezra Dean soon followed her husband, so that Benson was the possessor, through his forged deeds, of the two estates and other lands in and about N— belonging to the two men whose heirs he thus cheated out of their just inheritance."

"Dora Dean, the daughter he left penniless, and Henry Sloan, Jr., found himself in possession of his property with no knowledge of the claim, forged though it was, that Rufus Benson held upon it."

"He, to get a real quit claim from Dora, gave her a thousand dollars or so, and that gave him her signature to his forged deeds."

"Before going West, as he was in financial difficulties, Rufus Benson sold Daisy Dell Manor; and, showing Henry Sloan, who had married Dora Dean meanwhile, the forged deeds, turned over to him, for a few thousands in cash, the Elmwood property."

"Then he fled to the West for reasons best known to himself. Neither of the sales, of course, were legal, so your father, Miss Dangerfield, loses the property he had purchased, and especially as Squire Benson shows a prior claim to all the estates, of which his brother never knew."

"The squire was away at the time of his

brother's rascalities, but suspecting all, upon his return, kept quiet until Rufus Benson made his confession."

"Then we do not own Daisy Dell Manor, or its belongings?" queried Anita with the utmost calmness.

"Not the mansion and lands, no; but the furniture, your farm utensils and stock, yes. The sale of the real estate being fraudulent, all lands go to the heir of Squire Benson."

"Dare Sloan?" quickly asked Anita.

"Yes."

"And he is away."

"And dare not return to claim his vast wealth—Elmwood Hall, you know, being also included with other properties belonging to the two estates; and a very large fortune besides, that Squire Benson was the possessor of, for he was a millionaire, Miss Dangerfield."

"And his heir is a fugitive millionaire!" bitterly remarked Darke Dangerfield.

"Yes, a fugitive from the gallows, sir, and therefore, the hospital, after five years, will get the entire property."

"Not if Mr. Sloan should prove he was not guilty of the murder of Squire Benson, and should return?"

"In that case he could step into the immediate possession of his riches, and, for his own sake, I only wish that he could; but the evidence was too positive against him."

"Circumstantial evidence, sir, only, and that frequently hangs the innocent man," was Anita's response.

"True, very true; but Mr. Dangerfield, I have stated the situation exactly, sir, and I wish you would refer me to your lawyer, that he may look into the full merits and demerits, and see if there is not some plan by which he can save you, though I tell you frankly I see none."

"I was appointed by Mr. Benson, executor, with two others, but my absence in Europe prevented the matter coming up sooner, though it was known generally that Dare Sloan was the heir."

"I looked the whole matter carefully over, and really hoped, under existing circumstances of a fugitive heir and a charity hospital as a *dernier resort*, to find some crumbs of comfort for you and your daughter."

"But I could not, and yet, I will be most happy to consult with your lawyer."

"Judge David Verdan, sir, of N—, is my lawyer; and I thank you for your kindness in the matter."

"Judge Verdan is an interested party also, I find, for he bought the Elmwood Hall place from the fraudulent agent, Loyd Lucas, so he will try hard to find some flaw to save himself as well as you."

Lawyer Frank Stone had shown himself to be so gentlemanly and sympathetic that he was urged to remain to dinner at the Dell, and Mr. Dangerfield said he would then drive him into the town to see Judge Verdan.

The hack was then dismissed with a note to the judge asking him to be at his office at a certain hour, and Lawyer Stone remained at the manor.

Anita did not show what she felt by look or word, and was as pleasant as though poverty was not staring them in the face.

When she saw her father and Lawyer Stone drive away together, she broke down and threw herself upon the library sofa and burst into tears.

CHAPTER VII.

HOMELESS.

IT was late when Anita heard the roll of the carriage-wheels upon the gravel before the mansion.

She had become calm again, and assuming a cheerful demeanor, greeted her father as he entered.

He was accompanied by Judge Verdan and Lawyer Stone, who had returned as his guests for the night.

They had talked over matters in town, but wished yet to look at certain papers which they had brought with them.

Lawyer Stone was a thorough business man, and had come prepared for every emergency that might arise, so that much delay was prevented.

Supper was served, and the best wines were brought forth, after which the three gentlemen discussed matters over their cigars.

The conclusion arrived at was just what Lawyer Frank Stone had known throughout—the estates would have to be given up.

"Well, Anita, we are poor now," said Darke Dangerfield, with a sad smile, the next morning, as all met at breakfast.

"We certainly have plenty of company, father, in that respect," was the cheerful reply, and all admired the courage and spirit of the beautiful girl in adversity.

Darke Dangerfield accompanied the lawyers into N—, when they left, and returned late.

He looked pale and haggard when he entered the library, and, throwing himself into a chair, said gloomily:

"Well, my child, it is all settled, and I will tell you how, for Lawyer Stone was most kind throughout."

"He certainly appeared so, father."

"Yes, and proved himself so."

"All I paid for this place is a dead loss, of course; but we have the furniture left, our silver, carriages, horses and stock."

"Then there is a great deal of provender on the place, and a quantity of wines in the cellar, but not half what I expected, as your—Dean Dangerfield made way with them, as you doubtless have learned."

"I made to-day a rough estimate, my dear, and as we stay here until spring, we can sell out by degrees, and should have at least ten thousand in cash at the lowest figures."

"This will keep us from want; but you remember the letter I received two days ago from my old partner in the Colorado mines?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, he wrote me that his health was so broken that he would give me his share in the mine for six thousand dollars."

"It is beginning to pay, he states, and if he was able to work it himself there is a good deal of money in it for us both."

"So I will buy him out, and while you can go to the city to live, I will go to the mines of Colorado and dig us out another fortune, for I am determined that you shall yet be an heiress, my child," and Darke Dangerfield smiled sadly.

"Father, I will not leave you, but go to the West with you."

"You, Anita—you, reared in the lap of luxury, born with a silver spoon in your mouth, as they say, go to that wild land?" cried her father in amazement.

"Yes, sir, for you must know that the school where I graduated taught something else than what could be learned by books."

"We were taught how to keep house, clean house, cook, wash, iron, and all that was useful, and I flatter myself I could get a good place now as housekeeper, while, if it came to the worst, even do the work of a kitchen girl."

"Now, you have said that you never saw a better rider than I am, and a ten-mile walk I really enjoy."

"As a fisherwoman, I am always lucky, and with shot-gun and rifle I excel, as you have said, while you remember how I shot the panther that was about to spring upon Mrs. Sloan that day in the graveyard, and the beast was a large and savage one, rendered dangerous from having been two weeks free from his cage in the menagerie from whence he had escaped, you know."

"I did not lack for nerve then, and I will not again when the time comes."

"No, father, I go with you. I will take my well-trained horse, Quickstep, and you must take your fine horse, and we will go all prepared for roughing it in the Western wilds."

"Why, I really enjoy the idea, for I can keep house, or rather cabin; I can hunt and fish to supply the table, and you can dig gold in the mines!"

"I think we will both be real happy, father, so don't talk of leaving me behind, unless you wish to make me utterly wretched."

She went to her father as she spoke, and, leaning over the back of his chair, kissed him, while she toyed with his dark curls, just turning gray.

"Why, you are not so old, father; for see! gray hairs are scarce, and you don't look a day over forty, if so old."

"I'll find it hard to make folks believe you really my father."

And Anita laughed lightly.

It was hard for Darke Dangerfield, strong man that he was, to keep back the tears that welled up into his eyes, and for a moment he could not speak.

Then he said, earnestly:

"Anita, my child, you are as brave a little woman as I ever saw, and I am blessed in having such a daughter."

"It really makes me a better man to know that you are my child."

"I believe with you that it is best for you to go, for, though the work may be hard, I know we will be the happier for it if together."

"I will write at once, accepting Gardiner's offer, and we will be on the field for action with the early spring."

And so it was decided, and neither father nor daughter were crushed by the cruel blow which through the fraud of others had swept from them their riches.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GOLD WITCH AT HOME.

In the solitudes of Colorado, there is a canyon still known to-day as the Den of the Gold Witch.

It was also called, at the time of which I write, the Gold Witch's Canyon, and then there was no dwelling-place even an humble cabin or mining-camp, within many miles of it.

The canyon penetrated a ridge of lofty mountains, wild, rugged and desolate, and opened into a valley through a rocky gateway hardly forty feet in width; in fact it was hardly more than a chasm, the walls of rock towering on either side a couple of hundred feet above.

Entering this chasm one would go over a rocky trail which could not be ridden or walked over except in a slow walk, and extended for several hundred feet into the ridge, where it suddenly turned to the right, giving an observer the idea that the canyon ended there.

But, once around this turn, and though the sides were rocky cliffs, the canyon spread out into considerable width, and formed a fertile valley, watered by a stream that came tumbling down over the mountain ridge some three hundred feet above.

This brook ran through steep banks, after falling into the basin of the valley, and sought an outlet under the walls of cliff on the other side, bounding into a huge cavern and disappearing from sight.

At one place only was the brook fordable, and even there it was deep and the swiftly flowing current dangerous to any one who did not know exactly how to head in crossing, for a few steps one way or the other would cause a horse to lose his footing, and in an instant he would be swept between the steep banks of rocks and thence on into the cavern beneath the mountain to death.

Beyond this crossing the canyon was a lovely valley, with groves of trees, meadows

and bits of picturesque scenery, all overhung by the high cliffs surrounding it.

There was a tiny rivulet here, from a spring at the canyon's head, a small brooklet there, and altogether the spot was a charming one.

Hardly more than mile in depth, at the further end of the canyon, sheltered by huge rocks, a grassy mound and a grove of trees was a cabin, built against the face of the cliff that towered far over its roof.

The cabin was some twenty feet long, by twelve in depth, standing endways to the cliff, and a doorway in the outer end. There were two windows in the inner-room, but no door, and one window in the outer-room.

Along the cliff, within a few yards of the cabin, was a shelter, as for horses in bad weather and all in all, it was a warm and snug retreat.

Down in a meadow near was a vegetable garden; chickens roamed about the rocks at will, and a black and a white horse—both superb animals—were cropping grass not far distant.

On a perch by the side of the door sat a raven, and on the back of a rustic seat was a parrot, while a huge black cat was sunning herself upon a rock near by.

Lying upon the top of a natural mound, from the summit of which a view of the canyon to its mouth could be seen, was an enormous dog. He was not asleep, seeming to be on duty, as his eyes were upon the fern before spoken of.

A hammock of dry grass swung between two trees near the cabin, and in it was a human form, while a dog lay asleep near by.

The door of the cabin was open, and through it could be seen that the interior was by no means uncomfortable.

There was a large fireplace on one side, and shelves with cooking utensils and dishes, with a table in the center of the room.

Shelves on either side of the window, opposite the fireplace, contained books, papers, specimens of rocks, and a number of odds and ends picked up about the mountains.

There was a rack holding a repeating-rifle and shotgun, and several revolvers and a knife hung in holsters near.

A large chair, cushioned with moss and most comfortable, was by the side of the table, and completed the furnishing of the room.

Opposite the entrance door was another, a very narrow one. It led into the sleeping-room of the occupant of the cabin, but was closed.

Had it been open, it would have revealed a room of the same size as the other, and with two windows, but of course with no glass in them.

A rude matting covered the floor, made of the long valley grass, a few shelves, an easy-chair, and against the rear wall a bunk, or berth, like those in a ship's cabin.

The bed therein was home-made, evidently, for it had a canvas mattress stuffed with moss, and several blankets, with a pillow that matched the mattress.

The bunk was rather high, and was fitted strongly against the log wall of the cabin, and arranged with some attempt at ornamental curtaining.

The one who was resting, or asleep, in the hammock outside was the sole occupant of this solitary abode in a Colorado canyon.

As she arose from the hammock, a glance was sufficient to show the reader one whom he has met before.

Her half-military, half-barbarous attire revealed the mysterious woman known as the Gold Witch, and she was at home.

CHAPTER IX.

DEADMAN'S DEN.

SOME fifteen miles from where dwelt the Gold Witch in her lonely cabin in the canyon, was a valley in which was located a

mining-camp known by the title of Deadman's Den.

This valley was a beautiful one to look at, or had been when in its natural beauty, but the cabins of the miners scattered about it, with a group of houses in one part, and the cutting down of timber here and there had destroyed the picturesque loveliness of the place.

A legend explained that it had its name from the fact that a tribe of Ute Indians once dwelt there, and who were known to wear ornaments made out of beaten gold, which excited the envy of other tribes who went on the war-path to drive the Utes out and take possession of the valley themselves.

This "driving out" process, however, had not seemed to have worked well, to judge by the number of skeletons scattered about the valley of hostile warriors slain in battle or of Utes defending their homes and gold pockets.

The trail through the vale was studded with these grim relics of death, and graves unmarked and unknown were here and there in unpleasant frequency to remind one of the end of man.

There was yet another legend about this valley, to account for its name, that a band of road-agents, under a noted chief, had heard that the Indian dwellers there knew of secret gold-mines and that this road-agent chief became their pretended friend, gave them presents and led them on the war-path after the scalps of white settlers, thus gaining their confidence.

Then, he and his men had given their chiefs and leading warriors a grand entertainment and the result was a general poisoning, after which the outlaws set upon the remnant of the Indians, the old men, women and children, and drove them in dismay out of the valley.

The bodies of the poisoned chiefs and braves were left unburied, to become food for wolves, while the outlaw band set to work to find the gold-mines and pockets of the Utes.

But, the picking they got from the dead was all the gold they found, and they camped in the place for weeks hunting for the golden treasures.

One night their camp was attacked by a company of cavalry. A terrific battle followed. The outlaws were killed, or captured and hanged, thus dotting the vale and hillsides with more graves.

Years passed, and the fatal valley was shunned by red-skins and pale-faces alike, until a band of daring miners, with the gold-fever strong upon them, sought the seemingly accursed spot, and, so to speak, pitched their tents.

From them it received the appropriate name of Deadman's Den.

Working the hills, mountains, water-courses and canyons, the hardy miners found gold, and Deadman's Den developed into what, in mining parlance, was called a city, and Deadman's City was as often applied to the settlement as was the name of Den.

The "city" consisted of a string of cabins, some along a water course, others back on the hills, and a score or more grouped together at a central point.

At the latter there were several alleged "hotels," two blacksmith shops, a barber shop, four stores, keeping anything and everything from a pick to drugs, and a dozen saloons which were also gambling-dens as well.

In Deadman's Den, or "Den City," as also it was called, there were, perhaps, four hundred souls, or an average of that number, for one week "sudden death" would reduce the population by a score, and the next a few new arrivals would come in and add to it so as to keep up the average.

Not satisfied with a score of burying-places already started, the Deadman's Den inhabitants set about making one all for themselves,

something they could point to with pride as their own work.

Of course they had to furnish the material for their "Bonery," as they called it, but with those wild spirits this was an easy matter, and the graveyard was opened with a dozen victims as a starter.

This will give a faint idea of the lawlessness of Deadman's City, and when the hotels, stores and saloons got to going at full blast, and the miners found gold in paying quantities, the valley settlement became a lively place for all who made it their home.

Such was Deadman's Den when, one afternoon, the weekly coach rolled into the valley, and drawing up before the door of the principal hotel, known as the "Pards' Paradise," deposited two travelers who appeared a little out of the usual run of the visitors to the valley.

They were dressed more like city sportsmen, who had come West for a hunt on the plains, or in the mountains, than like miners or bordermen, and their appearance indicated that they were not wholly "at home" in that wild country.

Pat Leech, the proprietor of the Pards' Paradise, had a strange register, for it was nothing more than a board in which the month was cut at the top, and beneath it the words:

"PILGRIMS TO PARADS' PARADISE."

Then followed the names of the "pilgrims" who had been guests during the month, all neatly cut into the wood—in fact, carved most skillfully by a young man who made his living in Deadman's Den by just such work, carving headboards and signs.

Each month's tablet was laid aside, so that Pat Leech had something to look back to when he wished to discover any particular guest who had enjoyed, or suffered, his hospitality, or the case might be, for the proprietor of Pards' Paradise was a leech by nature as well as by name, though the miners had made a saint of him, calling him "Saint Patrick" on account of his very pious expression, which hid a very devilish heart beneath.

The two new-comers were met by Saint Pat, as the miners abbreviated the name, and welcomed, while he took them in at a glance.

"Here, Penknife Pete, register these gents' names, while I shows 'em to tha'r campin'-place. Yer names, gents!" and Saint Pat turned to his guests with what he meant for a winning smile.

The one addressed as Penknife Pete was the wood carver, and a better picture of a poet in distress, one who had descended to tramping, could not be found.

He wore his hair long, a Mephisto-like mustache and a coat which looked as though it might have done service in a Presbyterian pulpit, buttoned up to his chin.

He had a high hat, around which had been placed as a hat-band, a strip of wood into which had been cut the words, showing distinctly with the black hat for a background:

"PENKNIFE PETE,

"ARTIST."

His slender waist was encircled by a belt in which were stuck his carving utensils, and he was the only man in Deadman's Den who did not wear revolvers and a bowie, for if he did they were not in sight.

His pants were stuck into top-boots, and if Penknife Pete had any other property save what he carried about him no one had found it out.

In a "hark from the tombs" sort of a voice, deep and sepulchral, he asked:

"Your names, gents, and whar from?"

The two men looked at each other in a meaning way, and then one said:

"Dan Field, of New York."

"And yours, sir?"

"Burt Henry, of Virginia."

The two men were the forger and scape-grace Dean Dangerfield, and his partner in rascality Henry or Hal Burton. They had metamorphosed their names to please themselves.

CHAPTER X.

STRANGERS IN DEADMAN'S DEN.

AFTER his having forged his father's name to a check, to get twelve thousand dollars, Dean Dangerfield dared not seek the father he had so wronged and disgraced.

His sister, Anita, as we have already stated, had paid off his note at the bank in N—, also forged, and also settled his numerous debts, so that left him safe from arrest and prosecution. Then he had been well fitted out for his Western trip, for she had seen no reason why he should not go to join his father, who was then in the West, working his mining properties.

But, Dean Dangerfield had no idea of being set to work in the mines; nor did he intend to go West with the money he had obtained from his sister through assuming to owe it to Henry Burton for a loan which Burton had made him.

He wanted still more, so that, with his chum Burton, his ally in crime, deception and forgery on his own aunt and the large sum they thus actually had between them, they could laugh at misfortune and lead a wild life.

Dean had no thought that his own father would prosecute him about the forged check, and all of his other deeds he had, as he supposed, covered up.

But, Hal Burton was well aware that his own old aunt would send him to prison for forging her name, even had he been her own son, so he knew that he must keep in hiding.

The two had changed their names, as has been seen, stopped over in Chicago for a couple of days, and in a gambling den there, lost considerable of their crime-gotten money.

Then another halt had been made in Omaha, and there, too, they had had luck, so they had decided to strike for the mining country with an idea that they could play their marked cards upon the innocent miners and make a fortune for each of them.

With a couple of thousand dollars in his boot-leg, and a few hundreds in his pocket, the unworthy son of Darke Dangerfield and Hal Burton, (the latter also keeping some money hidden from his friend, and thus each deceiving the other) started by coach for Denver and thence to the mines near Deadman's Den.

On the way they were halted by road-agents and, in spite of all their bluster as to what they would do under such circumstances, simply handed over the money in their pockets, chuckling the while that they had saved that which they had hidden in their boots.

They traveled as "gentlemen," hunting and going about for pleasure in the West, and their outfit would carry out this assumption.

They were a little taken aback upon arriving at Deadman's Den to see that they had not created any very great excitement.

The "innocent" miners did not seem as impressed as the two young adventurers had expected they would be.

But, they followed the landlord to a log cabin in the rear of the hotel, which had a table, two chairs, two bunks, and in the latter a grass mattress and pillow each, devoid of sheets or slips, for miners furnished their own blankets, and if travelers had nothing of the kind they must pay "extra" for such luxuries.

Their traps they had to take to their cabin, and there they rigged themselves out in corduroy pants and shooting-jackets, slouch

hats, handsome cavalry boots, and belts of arms.

This done, they sallied forth to view the "town," and asked Saint Pat for a key to their cabin as they passed out through the "hotel."

"Key be durned! Ef yer catch anybody goin' inter yer cabing, or comin' out, shoot him, that's all, for nobody hes got any biz thar, pards, and we don't lock up in this kentry. We only shoots ther thief."

"A queer country, Burt," concluded his chum.

"Yes, not such fools, Dan, as we took 'em for," returned Burt Henry—as we now must call him and his companion by their borrowed names.

There was a look about Deadman's Den and its denizens that impressed the two strangers with an idea that they would not like the place; but their money would not last them if they ran around all the time and did not add to it, so they must see what was to be done there before pulling up stakes and decamping.

Upon their return to the hotel, they found their names most skillfully carved into the wooden register; in fact, Penknife Pete had surpassed himself.

"Like it, gents?" he asked, as the board was hung up for inspection.

"It is beautifully done," declared Dan Field.

"Indeed it is, sir; you are an artist," added Burt Henry.

"I knows I are a artist, pard; but who pays for this?"

"The landlord, of course."

"Ther landlord pays fer nothin'; his biz are ter take pay."

"Is 't to be paid for?" asked Dan.

"Now does I look like a man who worked fer love o' my feller-citizens?"

Their question was answered, and as they saw a crowd gathering they decided to pay, so Dan Field asked:

"How much?"

"Five dollars."

He handed it over and they were turning away, when the artist called out:

"Pard, you is forgetful."

"Me?" asked Burt Henry.

"Yas, you hain't paid me."

"Was not that pay for both?"

"Pard, does I look like a fool?"

Whatever were Burt Henry's thoughts, he did not utter them, but handed out five dollars with a sigh, while Penknife Pete remarked:

"If yer tarns up yer toes here, gents, I'll make a liberal discount in carvin' yer head-boards, and I'll cut in a leetle angl' climbin' a cross on 'em free for nothin', fer I hain't got no mean streak in my body."

The two friends were not so pleased with this act of generosity as Penknife Pete had seemed to expect them to be.

Saint Pat now called them to supper and they were glad to see that whatever the other shortcomings of Deadman's Den, the table of the Pards' Paradise was certainly a good one, as far as it could be so distant from any place where delicacies could be obtained.

But, if Saint Pat set an excellent table, he charged accordingly—as the young men soon discovered.

After supper the two guests being invited to indulge in the only amusement in the place, that of gambling, they adjourned to the saloon adjoining the hotel, and which was also owned by Patrick Leech.

There was a rude "table of chance" there, and many small tables where card-players could enjoy a game together, while a bar stretched across one end of the large room.

Tobacco-smoke, a cursing, loud-talking crowd, and the fumes of liquor filled the room as the two young men entered with the landlord, who at once picked out for them two partners for a game of cards.

These partners were honest miners, whom

the landlord knew would play a square game, for he did not wish to frighten the strangers off by pitting them against some of the terrors of the place at once.

The revenue to the landlord was so much for each game played, and the table of chance was generally sure to win for him nine times out of ten, so Saint Pat, as he put it, never "got left."

Those present glanced at the strangers as they entered, and several side remarks were overheard, such as:

"Pigeons to be plucked!"

"Tenderfeet that will have to pan out lively."

The table at which the two strangers were seated was up near the bar, where Saint Pat could have a good view of all that took place.

Of the strangers Dan Field won steadily from the start. He was playing partner with one of the miners; but, though Burt Henry and the other lost, neither seemed to mind it until Field suggested:

"Perhaps you would play better together, so suppose we change partners?"

This was done and the strangers were pitted against the miners, and the stakes soon became heavy.

But the luck of Dan Field clung to him, where that of his former partner deserted him.

At length quite a sum of gold was gathered in front of the strangers, who seemed elated with their luck, and the miners drew out.

Others took their place promptly, but the luck of the strangers could not be broken and they continued to win.

Then their opponents gave it up and two more took their places.

These two were noted as the luckiest men in the camps, but their good fortune seemed to desert them when pitted against the strangers, and after losing heavily one said:

"I guess you is reg'lar card-sharps, pards, for, somehow, yer seems ter hev your way in winnin'. We quits."

As they rose from the table a voice that was strangely low and musical said:

"I'll play you both, gentlemen, so see if your luck holds good against me."

All turned quickly and the strangers seemed fairly to start, for the one who addressed them was a woman!

She had entered the saloon, unnoticed in the excitement the game with the strangers had caused.

CHAPTER XI.

PUT TO THE TEST AND UNMASKED!

"The Gold Witch!"

Such was the low murmur that ran around the gambling-saloon as the woman stepped forward after saying, in a voice whose musical tones certainly belied her appearance, that she would play against the luck of the strangers.

It was in reality the strange woman who had become a dweller in the solitary canyon miles from Deadman's Den!

But, she was known to every man in the camps and most thoroughly dreaded by one and all.

Many believed her possessed of supernatural powers, but there were numbers who sought her aid in finding gold for them and paid her large sums for the favor.

By some mysterious way, known only to herself, the Gold Witch more often hit a gold lead than not, and so held her influence.

To play against her at cards, the miners found that it was simply throwing money away.

She always won.

But there were few who dared refuse her invitation to play when she singled them out as a victim, although they knew the consequences.

The visits of the Gold Witch to Deadman's Den were semi-monthly, but just when to expect her no one knew.

She might come twice in one week—two days in succession—and again once and miss a week; but she never put in an appearance more than twice in the month.

Now as she appeared in the saloon all were startled.

They always were startled when she came, and now all glanced from the Gold Witch to the strangers with considerable interest, for they saw that the two young men were singled out by the woman for her victims.

Both Dan Field and Burt Henry looked confused.

The woman stood gazing at them with her piercing eyes, seeming to read their very thoughts.

She wore her strange attire, of short red velvet skirt, top-boots and spurs, military jacket and slouch hat, with the grim death's-head pin and stuffed-snake cord.

Then she was armed, as they saw, and carried in her hand her staff.

Nor was she alone, for upon one shoulder sat the parrot, and upon the other the raven, while the huge bloodhound stood by her side.

"I never play with wom—ladies," at last gasped Dan Field.

"No, we play only for sport; we never gamble with the fair sex," echoed Burt Henry.

"Then to night you make an exception, for you play with me—the pair of you against me."

The words were determined, but the tone was soft and musical.

"Who is she?" whispered Field to Saint Pat.

But the latter dared not answer, for he saw that the woman had divined or heard the question.

"Who am I?"

"Well, men in these parts call me a Gold Witch, and I am a fortune-teller."

"The days of such superstitious ideas have played out. There are no fortune-tellers now," said Dan Field.

"Ha! you doubt my power, do you, young man?"

"I do."

"Then I'll prove it!"

"Come, we'll play three games, and you will win the first one, the two of you I mean, for I will play a lone hand against the two, and I will win the next two; now see if I am not right."

The game was soon begun, the woman having taken her seat facing the two strangers.

"You win, as I said," she remarked quietly, shoving toward them the hundred dollars she had lost.

"It was a guess of yours, for we shall win the next two," Burt Henry remarked.

The woman smiled and put up two hundred dollars.

The sum was at once covered and the Gold Witch won.

The miners laughed and the two strangers glanced uneasily at each other.

Then the Gold Witch said:

"Five hundred this time."

The money was put up and once more the Gold Witch won.

A shout of approbation greeted the woman's proof of her prophecy, and, settled by it, Dan Field said:

"It was but a guess."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes."

"I'll bet that I can guess your name."

"You have seen it on the tablet in the hotel."

"I refer to your own name. That is not your real name."

"You only say so because out here men always change their names."

"Those that do have good reasons for so

doing. I'll bet you a hundred dollars that I can tell you your names, both of you."

"Done! but remember, they must be the names we were christened under, for I admit, to avoid newspaper notices about our hunting trip out West we have changed our names."

A laugh from the miners greeted this, and the woman looked Dan Field straight in the face for a full minute.

Then she covered her face with her hands in a tragic manner and bent her head until the slouch hat fell off and her long waves of gray hair fell about her like a bridal veil.

"Place your hand upon my head," she said.

Dan Field did so, but with a feeling of awe in spite of his look of bravado.

"Murder!" shrieked the parrot in a voice that startled all, while the raven croaked ominously and the huge dog raised his head and uttered a long-drawn howl.

"It is Dean Dangerfield whose hand is upon my head, and his hand is stained with human blood," cried the Gold Witch.

The man shrunk away from her as though she was a snake, while his face became livid.

She did not move, but addressed the other.

"I have had enough of this tomfoolery," cried Burt Henry; so come, Dan, let us go."

"Yes, go, Dean Dangerfield, you and your friend in crime, Hal Burton, go hide yourselves further in the wilderness than is Deadman's Den," and the woman burst out into mocking laughter, as the two young men, now white-faced and trembling with fear, hastily left the saloon.

They went to their cabin and gazed at each other in dismay.

"My God! who is she, Burt?"

"Dan, I do not know."

"We cannot stay here?"

"No, that is certain."

"The stage starts back at dawn, I heard."

"We'll take it."

"We will."

Little did they sleep that night, and when the coach rolled out of Deadman's Den the next morning in the early dawn, it carried as inside passengers the two fugitives from justice, who were flying from dread of the Gold Witch—flying, but to go where they did not know!

CHAPTER XII.

THE WITCH'S WARNING.

THE Overland stage-trail out of Deadman's Den ran about five miles from the canyon where the Gold Witch had her home, and it was always a pleasure to Overland Jack, as the driver was called, to tell of the mysterious fortune-teller.

On the run in, the day before, others had been on the box with him, so that the two friends had inside seats.

They had chosen these on leaving Deadman's Den also, not wishing to be seen by any more persons than could be helped.

As they wheeled out of the valley Jack called down to them:

"Pards, you is losin' views o' scenery thet can't be ekal'd, so git up on the box with me."

They did so, and Jack, who had retired to bed upon reaching the Pard's Paradise the evening before, knew nothing of what had occurred in the saloon at night, so said:

"Does yer see ther high mountain point over yonder?"

"Yes."

"That are jist in front o' ther canyon o' ther Gold Witch."

The two men started, and Jehu Jack went on:

"She are a woman as can read a man's mind same as it were a book. She kin tell

jist whar ther gold are, and I tell yer she are a terror and no mistake."

"Who is she?" ventured Dan Field.

"Ther Lord only knows, pard. She come to these parts some time ago and she are ther Queen Bee here now, and folks is as skeered o' her as though she were ther devil hisself."

"I shouldn't mind ef she were on ther trail now, fer she often heads me off ter see who I has along."

Busy with his horses and his story of the mysterious woman, Jack did not notice how pale his passengers had become.

"She was in Deadman's Den last night, I heard," returned Burt Henry.

"Then she was thar fer a purpose, for she allus is, and, ten ter one we sees her—Thar! what did I tell yer?"

As the coach rolled around a bend in the trail, there was visible, but a few rods away, the Gold Witch!

She was mounted upon her black horse and had along with her the parrot, the raven and the large dog.

The two men would have given much to have been able to turn away, but it was too late, and at a motion from the woman Jack drew rein, for he was as afraid of her as though she was indeed a witch.

"Well, Dean Dangerfield and Hal Burton, I ran you out of Deadman's Den did I?"

"So be it! You have but one course before you and that is to take to the road. Go your way now; but we will meet again!"

As she spoke she rode up to the coach and with a piece of red clay, which served as chalk, made a cabalistic sign upon the door panel.

Passing around to the other side she did the same; then she halted a minute at the boot of the coach whereon a third sign was made.

"Go!"

As she uttered the word Jack drove off in a hurry.

"Curse the old hag," he muttered. "I never have her cross my trail and mark my coach that bad luck don't come to me."

"Now the last time she marked ther coach, ther road-agents kilt one o' my pilgrims and robbed ther balance."

"One time it were my best horse died on me; another time my axle broke in ther mountain pass; then again I were wounded from a unseen foe."

"Pards, I is afereed we is in fer trouble this run, and I heerd as how ther agents nabbed yer afore yer reached my drive, on ther trip in."

"Yes, we were robbed; but is there no way we can escape being robbed this time?" anxiously asked Dan Field.

"I don't say we is to be held up by ther agints, pards; but I does remark that whenever ther Gold Witch do make them signs on my old hearse, thar is some trouble sure ter foller. She don't like me nohow, for I cussed her one night at Deadman's when I were full o' bug-pizen."

The two passengers were certainly alarmed. A man with a guilty conscience is never easy in mind, and sin makes one in a measure superstitious.

In the past the two men would have laughed at the idea of a pretended witch possessing supernatural power; but now they had changed their minds, for she had given them their real names; and more: she had let fall an awful accusation against Dean Dangerfield!

Now she had threatened them, assuring them that they would have a bad ending, and that she would meet them again.

They were thoroughly alarmed, and remembering her words, Burt Henry asked:

"What did she mean by saying that we would take to the road?"

"Now, pards, you is oncommon green ter ax that. Why, she meant yer would do what many another good man hev hed ter

do in these parts—that is, take ter ther trails as a road-agent."

"A highwayman?"

"Yas, highwayman or low-wayman, it's all ther same."

"Nonsense! We are gentlemen and have honor."

"Waal, ef yer is gents and hain't got nuthin' but honor ter support yer, then my idee is that yer'll soon come to it, fer it's work, starve or steal in these parts."

"But has yer much dust in yer clothes?"

"You mean gold?"

"Sart'in."

"We have a little for our traveling expenses," was the cautious reply of Burt.

"Waal, I truly hopes we'll git through all right; but I warns yer thet ther agents is wide-awake along this trail."

"Are there many of them?"

"Pard, yer never knows how many until yer has handed over yer dust and other leetle presents yer may hev about yer."

"Could we not resist them?"

"Maybe; but ef yer does want ter try, jist let me git down and walk by."

"Oh no, we are strangers here and we leave all to you, and suppose we will have to put up with the loss of a little money."

"Yas, if they holds us up, jist count yer money as gone at keerds."

"Now we is gittin' near ther range, whar, ef we is to be held up, we will be," and Overland Jack nerved himself to meet what he had often had to meet before, while his two passengers were white and quivering with fear.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GOLD WITCH'S UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

THE Gold Witch paid her second visit to Deadman's Den the third day following her going there when her presence had so quickly frightened the two fugitives from justice out of the camps.

She learned that there was excitement above the average in the camp, as soon as she drew near the Pard's Paradise, for a large crowd had gathered there although it was a week day.

At her riding up to the hotel, accompanied by her vicious-looking bloodhound and parrot, and now mounted upon her white horse, a silence at once fell upon the crowd.

They were anxious to say nothing; every one of them would avoid her attention or notice.

"What's up, you old fool, that you all shut up as silent as the dead when I come near?"

This uncomplimentary speech was addressed to Pat Leech, who at once responded:

"There's been dire trouble on the Overland, mistress, and we were talking it over."

"I had a dream last night that there was death on the Overland—is it not so?"

"Yes, Mistress Gold Witch, Driver Jack has had his checks called in."

"Overland Jack?"

"The same."

"He passed out two days ago."

"Yes, and he was kilt on ther way out, shot dead on his box."

"He had passengers?"

"Lord love you, yes, and they were the same pleasant gentlemen you played cards with."

"And what of them?"

"The Lord knows, for they were not there."

"And their bodies?"

"Were not found."

"How did you get this?"

"A Government courier came through from the fort, and told us the coach was there, with poor Jack dead on the box, and the horses gone."

"We went up, a party of us, last evening, and brought the coach and body of Jack in, but we saw nothing of the two tenderfoot gents, and the driver is to be buried to-day and Penknife Pete are now carvin' his head-board, and it's beautiful to behold, for he's cut in leetle angels, a cross or two, and—"

"What care I for that fool's work? What else do you know of this affair on the Overland?"

"Next to nothing, and the boys were talking of getting up a purse to have you look into the matter for 'em."

"Bah! I can already see that it was the work of road-agents."

"Jack was too brash and went to drive by and caught the lead, while the others were suspected of having more gold than they showed so they were taken off to the camp of the outlaws to be searched or killed."

"That's the whole affair, unless the two sharps run for it when the coach was held up and thus made their escape."

"It's about as you say, mistress; but will you step in and see the remains o' poor Jack?"

"No, for I have all I can do to keep my eyes on live folks, without gazing upon the dead. When do you plant him?"

"Within the hour."

"Mark you, St. Patrick."

"Yes, Mistress Gold Witch?"

"Have you a white cat about your old hash-house?"

"Yas, thar is an old white tomcat in ther kitchen, and if yer wants him yer kin have him and thank yer, for he are ther consarnedest cat I—"

"Hold your tongue, for I do not want him; but, if you ever expect to find the murderer of Overland Jack, take the old white cat up with you and bury him alive in the grave with the body."

"Do you hear?" and without awaiting a response the Gold Witch rode away and halted at one of the stores not far away.

The proprietor was just closing up to attend the funeral, but hastily opened his shop to wait upon the Gold Witch, who made several purchases and then rode away out of the valley.

She went directly to her home, entering the canyon and riding to the brink of the foaming torrent.

Here she halted, and, uncoiling the lariat from her saddle-horn, threw the end of it to the bloodhound who caught it firmly in his teeth.

Then she rode in, her horse seeming to know the way to go across on the ridge, so as not to lose his footing, and the dog followed, being at once swept off his feet, but was towed over by his hold on the lariat.

Riding on up the valley, the Gold Witch dismounted at her cabin door and was immediately welcomed by a neigh from the black horse, a yelp from the dog lying on the mound as though on picket duty, a croak from the parrot, and a whine from the black cat.

"Well, it's pleasant to get a welcome, if it is from dumb beasts," she muttered, and was preparing to cook her supper, when the dog on watch gave a low growl.

"What is it?" she asked, as she ascended the mound and glanced down the valley.

"Aha! a visitor, and on foot!"

"I must see who he is and what he wants. He don't look like a miner," and, seizing her rifle, the Gold Witch called her black horse to her side, leaped upon his back and trotted down the canyon, followed by the bloodhound.

Her dumb pets were certainly in perfect training.

As she neared the brook, she beheld standing on the other side a slender man, clad in an undress uniform, with slouch hat, fatigue coat, top-boots, and the shoulder-straps of an officer.

"Well, who are you, and what do you

want of the Gold Witch?" the mysterious woman called out.

"I wish to see you upon a matter of importance, so permit me to come over," was the reply.

"All right: I'll send my horse over after you," and, leaping to the ground, the Gold Witch gave an order to her horse, which at once started across the stream toward the stranger.

A few minutes more and the visitor had dismounted and confronted the Gold Witch, who stood regarding him curiously.

He was a man of slender, but graceful form, a face that was beardless, and yet he seemed to be past thirty years of age, while his hair hung in clustering curls upon his shoulders.

"Well, sir, why have you come here?" sternly asked the Gold Witch, gazing upon her visitor, while over her face stole an expression it was hard to fathom.

"I have come to you, Susan Carr, because I am friendless and alone in the world."

"I have come to you for help," was the response, in a low, earnest voice.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WITCH'S FOE'S APPEAL.

THE Gold Witch looked at the one who had thus addressed her with a strange expression upon her face.

"You seem to know me, young man?" she said.

"Yes, as you know me, Susan Carr, and know that I am not what I now appear."

"You appear to be a young man?"

"Yes, but you know that I am a woman, and you are well aware who I am."

"Ah! you shake your head, do you? Well, let me refresh your memory, though I am sure you recognize me."

"You are the one whom I hired long ago, now over a score of years past, to help me in my revenge against Darke Dangerfield and the woman he had married."

"You, for certain golden considerations, procured a nurse for Mrs. Dangerfield under your pay, to give her child into your keeping, and you acted as nurse for me when my child was born."

"You pretended to carry out my wishes and kidnap her child, and you got your pay; but, long after, you came to me and told me that the boy I had raised, believing it to be one of Mrs. Dangerfield's twins, was in reality my own child, and that you had simply done nothing in the matter about kidnapping her boy."

"You were again Mrs. Dangerfield's nurse when her daughter, Anita, was born, and you then disappeared from my sight until you came to my ranch in Iowa to tell me my fortune had been lost—came as the Witch you now assume to be."

"Do you know me now, Susan Carr?"

"Oh yes, and I know that when Mrs. Dangerfield lay ill, when her little daughter Anita was but a few weeks old, that you, knowing Daisy Dell Manor so well, as it had been your old home, came by night and put poison in her medicine, thus taking her life."

"I know that when her daughter—a babe at the time you murdered her mother—had grown to maidenhood, your son saved her life, not only once, but twice, and that she, the beautiful Anita, saved you from a cruel death from the fury of a panther that had escaped from a circus and was about to spring upon you."

"She had her rifle with her, a mere toy, and her aim was deadly and she saved your life."

"Then I told you that Anita and your son had secretly met, and would love each other, in spite of the fact that her father had killed his father, and you had taken the life of her mother, and instantly you fled with your son to Iowa to hide away."

"But, adversity overtook you; and now, while he is East trying to save something from the wreck, you come to me, disguised as a man, and ask for help."

The Gold Witch had spoken in a low, earnest tone, and with a sneer upon her face.

The disguised woman, Dora Sloan, had listened to her in perfect calmness, without a change of expression on her face, though she was very pale.

"Yes, I need aid and come to you, as you took my money, two thousand dollars, for what you did not do."

"My son can save nothing from the wreck of our fortune; we have little left to live on, until we can get work, so I came to you, for you are rich, to at least pay me back what is my due."

"I am sick, wretched and in deep distress."

"And how came you to find me?"

"It is not a hard matter to track one such as you, Susan Carr, with your horses and dogs."

"Ah, and you trailed me here, after I visited your home?"

"I sent one to track you to where you lived, and when he returned and told me where you were I determined to seek you."

"And came disguised as a man?"

"Yes, for a woman cannot travel alone in these wild regions; but, is not my disguise a good one?"

"Perfect; but, how came you to reach me so readily, and on foot?"

"I came by coach, sat up with the driver and asked him where you were, and to put me off at the nearest point the Overland Trail ran to your canyon, and he did so, some hours ago, and I came on here, with yonder peak for a guide, as he told me it was just in front of the canyon of the Gold Witch."

"Well, you are a plucky woman, Dora Sloan, and I'm not one to turn you away from my cabin, though I hate you as bitterly as you do me."

"And why should you hate me?"

"I'll tell you, now that you have dared to come and seek aid of me; but, come now with me to my den, and we'll talk matters over."

"You are welcome for a few days, and then we must part, to renew our hate as before, for there can never be other than hate between us, Dora Sloan."

"No, I am well aware of that, for I know all that you are, and you know me."

"As a murderess, yes; but come," and the Gold Witch led the way up the canyon to her home.

CHAPTER XV.

A REASON FOR HATRED.

WHEN Dora Sloan reached the cabin of the Gold Witch, the dogs, cat and birds regarded her with marks of deepest interest.

They had never before seen any visitor welcomed to the hospitality of their mistress's home.

Seemingly at ease in her man's attire Dora Sloan went to work to help the Gold Witch all she could, and the two soon had a tempting meal ready to sit down to.

They talked upon many topics, not, however, touching upon anything of an unpleasant nature, and the Gold Witch took an interest in telling of how she came to the gold mines.

She explained that she had nursed a miner who had died and left her a map of his cabin and surroundings, and that he had with him the horses and pets she then had with her.

After his death she had come to the mines, with his horses and dogs, who had come to obey her implicitly, and that she had traded on the superstitions of the miners to make money, and added:

"I have laid by a snug little sum I can tell you, Dora Sloan."

Dora Sloan encouraged her to talk about the miners, and got from her a full history of Deadman's Den and its denizens.

It was late when the two retired, a bed having been fitted up in the front room for the Witch's guest.

The next day Dora Sloan seemed anxious to do all in her power to help her hostess, for she fed the dogs and birds, and made the more intimate acquaintance of the two horses.

In the evening as the two women sat together in the cabin, the Gold Witch asked:

"How much longer do you wish to remain here with me?"

"I can only remain a couple of days, or a week at furthest, for my son will be coming back soon and I must meet him."

"Where will you meet him?"

"I appointed a place in Nebraska."

"And what will you both do?"

"You have told me such glowing stories of the mines here, that I feel tempted to come here and turn miner."

"No; it will not do, for you and I can never be neighbors, Dora Sloan. Go elsewhere."

"And why is it, Susan Carr, that you hate me as you do? How have I ever wronged you?"

The Gold Witch fairly started at the question.

Then she asked almost savagely:

"You would know why I hate you?"

"Yes, I would know the reason of your hatred?"

"I'll tell you. Look at me!"

"Well?"

"Do we look alike?"

"I do not see that we do."

"Well, we should."

"And why?"

"Because your father was my father, Dora Sloan."

"Woman, you are mad!"

"It is a lie! I am as sane as you are."

"Your father, Ezra Dean, was a gay young man, and had money. He went off to college, for his parents wished him to have a profession, to practice medicine, as well as to farm, and there he met my mother, the daughter of an honest man, the janitor of the college."

He pretended to love her, and urged her into a secret marriage with him.

"I was born, and when but a year old, my father tired of college life and returned home to become a farmer."

"My mother begged him to acknowledge her as his wife, and he laughed at her, telling her that the marriage was a bogus one."

"And so it proved, for a fellow-student, disguised as a clergyman, had performed the bogus ceremony."

"It nearly killed my mother, but at last she rallied and went to work to support herself and child."

"She gave me a fair education, and when she died, after a year of illness, I was left destitute; but my experience in nursing taught me to seek such a place and I got good wages."

"Before my mother died she told me all, and taught me to hate my father, and to hate you, for he had married a lady of wealth, your mother, and you were his acknowledged child before the world, while I was an outcast."

"Is it a wonder that my whole life was embittered, and that when you wanted a nurse I gladly went to you, but with a feeling of revenge?"

"It was my joy to find that you hated Darke Dangerfield's wife, and I got you into my power; but I did not carry out your evil plans against the Dangerfields."

I saw you put poison in the medicine of the sick woman, and I followed you when you slipped out of the house by the upper

balcony and the large tree that swung over it.

"You placed yourself in my power, Dora Sloan, and I am glad to see you have to beg from me now, and to know that you are poor, you and your son, for I hate you for your father's sake, the father who wrecked my mother's life."

"We are half-sisters, Dora Dean, and yet I hate you; but I give you food, and I shall give you money, for it is my revenge to do so. It makes me happy to have you beg of me."

"Do you want proof of what I tell you, Dora, my sister?"

"No; for I believe—in fact, am sure that what you say is true."

"My father confessed his sin to my mother, just before he died, but I knew not before that you, Susan Carr, was my half-sister."

"Yes, my mother's name was Carr, and I took it, for I have no right to my father's name of Dean."

"Well, you know my reason for hating you now, Dora, and you know that I entertain you because it is a joy to have you eat of my bread and beg me for aid."

"Remain as long as you please, for it is a joy for me to feed you, and some day it will be my pleasure to let that proud son of yours know his grandfather's crime, and that he has a witch for an aunt," and the woman laughed in a bitter, mocking way.

Several days passed away, but the past history of the two was never alluded to again.

The Gold Witch took pleasure in telling of all there was of interest in the Colorado mines, and about the miners of Deadman's Den.

"I am a bad woman, sister Dora," and she always emphasized the sister with a sneer. "I am wicked, for I always cheat at cards."

"Why, I have duplicate packs of those old Saint Patrick, the landlord of Pard's Paradise buys, but mine are marked."

"I always demand a new pack to play with, and substitute mine for them, for I go prepared for it."

"The other night I recognized the two men who came from where was once your home."

"I knew them at a glance, and saw that they were sailing under false colors, for they had changed their names."

"One day I had word from my agent, for I have a man in my employ in N—, telling me of what was going on there, and from him learned that one of the two men I saw had committed a forgery and fled."

"The other had also departed, some said disowned by his father, but no crime was alleged against him."

"I learned, also, more news you would like to hear; but, I'll tell you some day, I'll come and see you and tell you, for it will keep; it will keep until—well, one day I will tell you, but not now—no, not now!"

"Well, I bet with the two young men that they would win one game, and I the next two."

"I played against their marked pack, which I saw. In shuffling, I changed to my marked pack and I won and they could not understand how they no longer saw their secret marks on what they supposed was their own pack."

"Then I called them by their real names, my parrot, at a sign from me, shrieked, and by luck cried 'murder,' and the dog howled, while I told one of the men that his hand was stained with human blood."

"It was but a clever guess on my part, from news I had heard from N— but I hit him so hard by it that he and his comrade left Deadman's Den at dawn the next morning on the coach."

"I headed them off on the road, and marked some signs on the coach, which

scared them terribly, and now I have heard that the coach was held up by roadmen, that Jack the driver was killed and that the two young fellows have disappeared."

"Killed, too, I suppose, by the road-agents?"

The Gold Witch laughed, but made no reply.

CHAPTER XVI.

OVERHEARD.

THE next day Dora Sloan, still wearing her disguise as a man, walked off from the cabin to be alone.

She wandered down the canyon, lost in deep meditation, for her brow wore a look of anxiety and an expression of pain was upon her face.

She had become pretty well acquainted with the habits of her half-sister, the Gold Witch, and seemed to study her every look and movement.

The horses, dogs, cat and birds seemed to regard her as one of the family and treated her no longer with a watchful eye, as at first.

Walking down the canyon she sat down among the rocks near the ford, to suddenly spring up and hide, for she beheld a horse man approaching!

She had thrown herself flat down behind a rock, on which grew some scrub bushes, expecting the horseman would cross the ford and ride on to the cabin, for the Gold Witch had told her how miners came to get from her knowledge of where to dig for gold.

The Gold Witch had also told her how she kept one of the dogs on watch all the time, so that any one entering the canyon would at once be seen and the alarm given by a yelp or growl.

To cross the ford was to risk life, even when one knew the channel, or rather ridge that a horse had to follow across.

The sharp yelp of a dog now reached the ears of Dora Sloan. Soon there came the clatter of hoofs and the Gold Witch halted within fifty feet of her.

"Go over and bring him," ordered the woman, as she dismounted from her horse and the intelligent animal at once obeyed, crossing the ford.

Knowing that the Gold Witch did not suspect her presence there, Dora Sloan remained quiet, and was most glad to feel that one of the dogs had not accompanied their mistress, as she would surely have been discovered.

The horse soon returned and the rider dismounted, and from her hiding-place Dora saw him distinctly through the bushes.

He was a thick-set man, some fifty years of age, and wore the dress of a miner; but he was attired with marked neatness, and his weapons were of the finest, while heavy spurs were upon his heels.

"Well, Captain Colorado, I suppose you have come to pay me my share of the pickings I sent you the other day?" said the Gold Witch.

Her words were distinctly heard by Dora, as also the reply of the man whom she now knew to be the noted outlaw chief, the terror of the stage-trails.

"Yes, Gold Witch; but, why did you mark Jack the driver to die, for I so read the sign?"

"Right, for he caught me speaking to your messenger on his last run in, and I fear suspected me, so it was best for him to be out of the way."

"Of course."

"And the two men?"

"I fleeced them, as your sign read that they had money hidden away, and then threatened to hang them, or let them join my band."

"They chose the latter, of course?"

"Oh, yes; they were only too glad and

will make good road-raiders, for they are evidently reckless young villains."

"Certainly."

"Who are they?"

"I knew them East, or rather, knew who they were, and recognized them at Deadman's Den."

"One is a forger, and the other I rather suspect of murder; but, they will be only too glad to join you, and I so signed on the coach, knowing you wanted men."

"Now, what did they pan out, Captain Colorado?"

"They panned out well, and each was greatly surprised to see what the other had."

"I halted the coach, and at once shot Overland Jack, soon as I saw your sign to do so. This scared the two Easterners terribly, and I told them that I knew they had more than their purses showed, and would kill them if they did not hand it out."

"Then they did so. One had in his boot, two thousand dollars, and the other in his coat-collar nearly as much."

"I gave them back their purses and the money in them, with a couple of hundreds each, and all their traps, when they said they would join me. I also presented them with two splendid horses, and they seem to be content."

"And now to our division of the spoils," and the eyes of the woman brightened with avariciousness.

"Your share is just five hundred dollars, Gold Witch."

"So be it, but I should have more."

"It is short division with you, with no danger to run, but with me it is long division, as I divide with fourteen men, have expenses to pay and all the risk to run of getting shot or hanged."

"Well, so be it, Captain Colorado."

"There is no more business between us, I believe?"

"Not until I come to pay you more money on pickings you send me."

"Good-by."

He leaped upon the horse of the Gold Witch, and was at once taken back across the stream; then, the animal returning, his mistress sprung into her saddle and rode back toward her cabin.

Dora Sloan saw the outlaw chief mount his splendid bay animal that had patiently awaited him, and leave the canyon.

From rock to rock she glided, until, gaining a grove of pines, she thence returned to the cabin, not having been missed by the Witch.

But, she had discovered that her half-sister was in league with Captain Colorado, chief of the outlaw band known as the Upper Range Road Raiders.

"I must delay no longer to carry out the purpose for which I came here. Delays are dangerous."

"Dare will soon be returning to look for me at Buck Brandon's Ranch, and I must act."

"Yes, this very night will I do the deed," and an expression swept over the face of Dora Sloan that was awful to behold, and had the Gold Witch seen it she would have been warned of danger to come.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COURIER.

DAYS passed at Buck Brandon's Ranch, and Dare Sloan began to be more and more anxious to hear from his mother.

He could do nothing toward finding her, for whither she had gone, after parting with Brandon, neither the cowboy nor the son could conjecture.

She had left the letter for him not to be anxious, and to await at Brandon's Ranch until he heard from her.

But then, so long a time had elapsed that he could but feel the greatest uneasiness about her.

He questioned Buck Brandon over and

over again, and could see that the cowboy also felt nervous, though he tried not to show it.

Dare helped his friend in the care of his cattle, hunted for game, fished, and did all that he could to pass away the time; but his thoughts were busy about his mother the whole time.

His going East, his arrest, speedy trial and sentence, and what had followed, had taken some four months only; but, what had Mrs. Sloan been doing all that time?

A month of it he could account for; after that he was all in the dark.

One day as the two friends were seated in front of the cabin, after a good Sunday dinner, a horseman was seen coming across the prairie.

He rode up to the cabin half an hour after and asked:

"Is this the Brandon Ranch?"

"Yes, pard, and I am Buck Brandon at your service," responded the cowboy politely, and he added:

"Dismount, stake out your horse and I'll find you something to eat."

"Thank you, pard, I'll do it, for I've come a long way, from away down in the Colorado mining country, and I was sent from the fort here, to see you."

"Well, you can rest now, and then tell me how I can serve you."

"It's easy told, pard, for I wants ter give you a letter."

"Ah!" and Buck Brandon took the letter and broke the seal.

"It is for you, Dare," he said, handing the inclosed letter to his friend, while he read a line written to him with it, and which said:

"Will Mr. Brandon kindly give the within letter to my son and confer another favor upon one whom he has before well served?"

Dare grasped the letter, for he at once recognized his mother's writing.

Then he walked off by himself, while Buck Brandon looked to the comfort of the courier.

The letter was dated two weeks previous to its reception, and was simply headed:

"COLORADO CAMP."

The missive read as follows:

"MY DEAR SON:—

"This will reach your hand through a courier going on Government duty to Fort McPherson, and who will have a few days to himself, he tells me, after delivering dispatches to the commandant there."

"You are no doubt most anxious regarding me, because of my long silence, but it has been impossible for me to sooner communicate with you, as my plans were not formed for our future."

"I was determined to be thoroughly settled ere I sent for you, and the chances for our future success are now most satisfactory, I assure you, though there are certain conditions with them that I fear you will not like."

"Still, my son, we cannot have all things as we wish them in this life, and I assure you that if we put up for a short while with certain ills, riches will come to us rapidly."

"I fear that not a dollar will be gained to us from the failure of the bank, or the sale of Elmwood Hall, so it is best that we seek the means now in our power to gain wealth."

"I decided, after certain moves I had made, to come to the Colorado mining country, and thus far all is most favorable."

"I have settled in a good home; but, what is more, there is work for us to do that will 'pan out rich' as they say in this country."

"The field is before you and you have but to work it."

"I wish, therefore, for you to come to me. The courier will be your guide, as he passes near, on his way to a fort in New Mexico."

"He will guide you to a spot where I met him, and you are to go into camp there until I come, so be prepared for it."

"I will look for you about the seventeenth of next month, for the courier told me that would be about the time of his return; but, should I not be there as I said, go into camp and await me."

"If you delay three days and I do not appear, then seek the nearest mining-camp and get the direction to find the home of the Gold Witch."

"When you reach her canyon, and you must go alone, blow a whistle, which you will find in the package the courier will give you."

"A horse will come at your bidding. Mount him and let him take you across the torrent to the cabin of the Gold Witch."

"Under no circumstances attempt to guide the horse, for he will take you over in safety."

"Arriving at the cabin look over the door and you will find a letter."

"I give these directions in case I should not be able to meet you, after you have delayed three days in camp, for life, you know, is uncertain with all of us."

"In the package the courier will give you, is gold to the amount of five hundred dollars, which you may find useful, as I know not if you have any."

"If you are amply supplied, then give it to Brandon as a souvenir from me."

"With the hope of seeing you before very long, I am ever

"Devotedly

"YOUR MOTHER."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TO THE GOLD MINES.

TWICE did the young man read over this letter.

There was much in it that seemed mysterious to him, and yet he could not fathom it without seeing his mother.

He was delighted to at last hear from her and anxious to start at once to join her.

"The seventeenth she says, and this is the second."

"Well, I'll go and see what the courier has to say."

He walked back to the cabin and found the courier enjoying the very substantial repast which Buck Brandon had set before him.

He was a man of about forty, wore a fatigue uniform and was heavily armed.

As Dare Sloan approached he said:

"I have a package for you also, sir, in my saddle pocket there, and it is money, the Gold Witch told me."

"The Gold Witch?"

"Yes, sir, the one who gave me the letter and package for you."

"It was a woman called the Gold Witch, then, who gave them to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please tell me all you can about it."

"Well, sir, I was riding along the Overland Trail, some fifteen miles from Deadman's Den, carrying dispatches out of New Mexico to Fort McPherson, when I met a person who, in those parts, is known as the Gold Witch, for she has the power to find gold and tell fortunes, they say."

"I had met her twice before—once on the trail, while I was carrying dispatches, and once in Deadman's Den, so I saluted her politely and drew rein, as she said she wished to speak to me."

"She asked where I was going, and when I told her she brightened up and told me she wished to send an important letter to a ranch some days' ride from McPherson, and asked me to wait until her return."

"I told her I was in a hurry; but she told me she would give me a hundred dollars if I would delay four hours, and I could make up the time."

"So I waited and she rode off at a gallop; but she was back within three hours and gave me the package and letter, which I told

her I would deliver, as I would have four days' rest at McPherson.

"Then she gave me an extra hundred for my ride to this ranch and back, and I was to guide you to the place where I left her."

"All right, my man; I will go with you at once."

"No, sir, for couriers must ride alone, and I don't leave McPherson until day after tomorrow, so I will return to-night and have two days' rest there."

"Then I'll pick you up on the trail right at the Sand Hills to the southward and beyond the Platte."

"All right; on the third day from this?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be there, and you can make another hundred by guiding me to the place where you left the one who gave you the letter for me."

"I will have a pack-horse, and as my animals are good ones we will not delay you on your ride, while we will not suffer for provisions on the way."

"By the trail you take it will be the middle of the month before we get there?"

"Yes, sir, all of it; about the seventeenth I guess, for I have several points to make on the way, you know."

It was thus decided; and, soon after, the courier started upon his return to the fort, while Dare Sloan began to get his horses in trim for the long trip.

The money sent by his mother he turned over to Buck Brandon, to whom it came well, and was fully appreciated, and the next day the young man took his leave of his faithful friend, for he was anxious to have a day's rest for his horses at the Sand Hills, while waiting for the courier.

The Sand Hills were reached in good time, and, twenty-four hours after, and promptly when due, the soldier courier arrived and the two started upon the trip southward.

Upon the morning of the sixteenth, and after a long ride, full of adventures in dodging Indians and road-agents, the two arrived at the rendezvous appointed in Dora Sloan's letter.

"It was here I met the Gold Witch, and yonder up that valley is a good camping-place; but we are a little ahead of time."

"You may have to wait some days, but I guess she's prompt," said the courier.

Halting for dinner, he received his pay, and bidding farewell to Dare Sloan, the soldier mounted his horse to go upon his way, intending to stop for the night at Pard's Paradise in Deadman's Den.

"Friend Cole, I am going to ask you to do me the favor not to speak of having guided me here, or having brought a letter to me, for I have reasons I cannot explain for wishing it," said Dare, as he grasped the soldier's hand.

"No, indeed, sir; I will not speak of it, for, as I said to you, couriers must ride alone, and then both you and the Gold Witch have been most generous to me, and I'll have three hundred dollars to send to my good wife in Ohio."

"I'll keep silent, sir, for I know you are all right, and I only hope to meet you again some day."

"Good-by and luck to you; and remember, I generally pass by here between the fifteenth to the eighteenth, going north or south, of each month, should you need my services again."

"Thank you, Cole; I'll not forget it," and Dare Sloan waved his hand as the courier dashed away at a gallop.

For a long time he stood gazing after him, feeling very lonely, as he had found him a very clever and brave fellow. Then he turned to fix up his little camp, as he expected to have to wait at least a day or two, being ahead of time.

As he turned he started, for there before him stood a strange form.

It was the Gold Witch.

CHAPTER XIX.

PROF. HOWE'S PLUCKY PASSENGERS.

THE coach on the Overland Trail, which had been running into Deadman's Den with poor Jack on the box, had found another driver in the person of Bob Howe, a man who was known along the frontier as a very dangerous personage to anger.

Bob Howe was an old scout; had also been an old hand with the reins, for years, and knew the country most thoroughly, while he had not a particle of fear in his composition.

Bob, likewise, was a dead-shot. Once he had killed three road-agents who had "held up" his coach, before they could get in a shot.

One day Bob Howe was coming along at a good pace, on his run into Deadman's Den, and was alone on the box, with two passengers inside.

His face wore a worried look, for he had a fear of being halted by road-agents, and there was one reason why he could not fight back, if a chance of escape presented itself.

That reason was in the shape of a lady passenger.

"Why, she nigh took my breath away, pards, when I seen her," he had said in telling his companions about his passengers.

"And her pa are that fine a gent as I ever sot eyes onter."

"But, Lordy! the gal are pretty!"

The passengers were none other than Darke Dangerfield and his daughter, and the beauty of Anita had not alone impressed Bob Howe.

They had sold out their things at Daisy Dell Manor and vacated, and Mr. Dangerfield had put his money into the mine he had spoken of as being in Colorado.

It was, in fact, not far from Deadman's Den, and the former owner of it had four men employed in getting out of it what gold they could find.

Mr. Dangerfield had been unable to persuade Anita to remain East, for she would go with him, so he had determined to make themselves as comfortable in their frontier home as possible.

They had purchased at the last town, before reaching Deadman's Den, a lot of furniture which they would need, with other things to make them comfortable, and left all to be brought by wagon-train, along with several fine horses, while they took the stage to go on ahead and get a house to live in.

It was Anita's presence in the coach that worried Bob Howe, for he had made up his mind if halted by the road-agents to shoot from the word go, if there seemed any chance to get through.

"I'll hev ter let 'em go through ther outfit," he muttered to himself, and so he drove quietly on his way.

Darke Dangerfield and Anita had both heard of the dangers of the road, and yet were not alarmed.

In fact, Mr. Dangerfield had won Bob Howe's respect by saying:

"If it comes to a brush, driver, I am at your service, and you know best what to do."

"But ther leetle one, sir?"

"Don't mind me, driver, for I am not one to submit to being robbed, if you can fight them off," replied Anita.

"Waal, you has got pluck from 'way back, both of yer," averred Bob.

But, he made up his mind that he would submit to anything rather than have Anita placed in danger of a bullet.

As he neared the spot where Jack had been shot, two men suddenly stepped into the trail before the leaders, one on either side of them, and a voice called out sharply:

"Draw rein! hands up!"

Bob Howe uttered an imprecation, but he obeyed promptly, and up went his hands.

The two men were masked and one stepped before the leaders, catching their bits, while

the other walked up to the side of the wheelers and held Bob Howe covered by his rifle.

A third man now appeared from behind a thicket, and he had been the one who had given the order to halt.

He was tall, slender in form, wore his coat buttoned close, and had a black mask on.

He carried a cocked revolver in one hand, and in his belt was another.

"What have you, driver, that is worthy our attention?" he asked, as he advanced toward the side of the coach.

"Look an' yer'll find out, yer cussed thief o' ther trail; but I warns yer ef yer insults by word or look ther leddy in thar, yer'll git no rest until yer day o' hangin'."

The man slightly hesitated, then advanced and opened the stage door, his revolver at a level.

Hardly had he done so when there came the crack of a pistol, followed by a yell from Bob Howe and a shot, and the horses dashed forward, trampling beneath their hoofs the man who stood at their heads.

So quickly had the shot been fired, so sudden the result, that the coach was dashing on, with Bob Howe lashing his horses, ere Darke Dangerfield and Anita knew what had happened.

Then they beheld a horseman dash out into the trail, a revolver in either hand, and, though alone, he seemed to fearlessly attack the road-agents, whose shots were rattling forth from the rocks and bushes.

Then the coach swept on out of sight, and they saw no more.

"Driver! Driver! halt and let me go back to the aid of that brave fellow who came to our rescue," Darke Dangerfield had called out.

But Bob Howe had swept on under whip and voice until safe, and then called back:

"Pard, you is a brave one, I knows; but, yer hain't no biz back yonder when yer leetle gal are here ter look arter, so we sails right on."

"And that brave horseman?"

"Now thet young pilgrim kin look arter himself, and he'll do it, though I didn't think he were quite ther reckless piece o' humanity he showed himself ter be this day o' our Lord."

"Had he no help?"

"Nary; but we'll talk when we gits ter Deadman's Den, for jist now hain't no time ter swap conversation."

And Bob Howe rolled on at the same rapid pace until he reached the door of the Pard's Paradise.

There Saint Pat came out to receive his guests.

They were ushered into the best rooms the hotel afforded, while the loafers seemed to be struck dumb at the sight of Anita.

Before leaving the mine, the former owner had ordered a house built for Mr. Dangerfield and his daughter, and it was about ready for them; but until the furniture came, they were to stop at Pard's Paradise, where arrangements had already been made for their comfort.

"I fear this is terrible for you, my child," said Darke Dangerfield as he gazed about him.

"On the contrary, father, I really like it, for all is so odd, so strange, and did you see those miners as we drove up?"

"Why, every one of them doffed their hats to me, and bowed as though a French dancing-master had commanded them to 'salute your partners,'" and Anita laughed merrily.

Soon after Bob Howe appeared, accompanied by Landlord Leech, who said:

"Bob says as how you was fearful about the young gent as sailed into the agents, and wishes me to tell you about him."

"We certainly shall be glad to hear that he has escaped unharmed, Mr. Leech," said Anita.

"He has escaped, and no mistake, miss."

"Yer see, ther agents has been ther devil on ther trail, o' late, and since Overland Jack were kilt, two more of the drivers has had the'r toes turned up.

"This made ther young gent go on ther trail, and Bob Howe here don't know him as we does, he bein' new."

"And who is he?"

"Ther man thet took the contract ter clean out the agents?"

"Yes."

"He are known in these parts as Dare Devil, for we knows no other name fer him and thet suits him to a dot.

"He hain't been but a few months at Deadman's Den, though his mother has lived hereabout for a couple o' years or more."

"His mother?" asked Anita quickly.

"Yas, miss, the Gold Witch we calls her."

"The Gold Witch?" echoed Anita and her father.

"Yes, miss, and sir to you: that's ther only name we knows her by."

"And who is she?"

"A woman as knows how to read fortunes and looks like a she-devil, beggin' pour pardon, miss."

"And this horseman who attacked the road-agent is her son?"

"Yes, miss, and he lays in wait for 'em, and when they jump a coach he jumps them, and somebody gits hurt, and he bein' the son o' a witch, yer see he don't git wounded or kilt."

"This is a remarkable story, landlord," said Darke Dangerfield.

"Yer'll hear more remarkabler things than what yer has, pard, if yer stays in this kentry," chimed in Bob Howe, and soon after he and the landlord left the guests to meditate upon the country they had come to, and the people they were to dwell among.

And, somehow, the thoughts of Anita dwelt much upon the mysterious horseman who had come to their aid on the Overland Trail.

CHAPTER XX.

A STRANGE CONFESSION.

DARE SLOAN was almost startled at the form that met his eyes as he turned from gazing after the departing courier.

It was the Gold Witch, in her red velvet skirt, cavalry boots and spurs, slouch hat with its snake cord, and military jacket, sash and belt of arms.

Her face was dark, her hair snow-white, and her eyes downcast.

"My good woman, I believe you bring me a message from my mother," he said, kindly.

"Follow me!"

She turned away as she spoke, and went to her black horse, which was not far distant.

Leaping upon his back, she again called out:

"Mount, and follow me!"

He soon had his traps ready, and obeyed.

She led the way for several miles, turned into the canyon and halted at the torrent.

"Ride close behind me and give me your bridle-rein."

"Also hold tight to the lariat of your led horse, for a false step here may cost life."

He obeyed and she entered the stream, holding the rein of his horse and keeping him close, while he did the same for his led horse.

Reaching the cabin she dismounted and stepping to the door threw it open.

Then she turned and held out her arms, while she cried:

"Dare, my son, do you not know me?"

"Mother! Great God! can this be you?"

"I is," and she would have fallen had he not caught her in his strong arms, for she had swooned away.

He soon brought her to and as she met his eyes she said in a low tone:

"Do not condemn me, my son, until you have heard all."

"Why, mother, how you have suffered, for you positively look twenty years older and your hair is as white as snow."

"It turned white in a few hours, Dare, and no wonder."

"I have sinned deeply, my son, but I must confess all to you."

"Then I shall be content, and you will bear with me for the time I may yet have to live."

"I have much to tell, my son, and I only hope that you will not hate me for it."

"Hate you, my mother?"

"But, you do not know how I have sinned."

"You can have done nothing that can make me hate you. A son may pity a mother, may be hurt that she has sinned, but he can never hate, no, no, not that."

"God bless you, Dare, my noble boy!" she said, and then, after a short silence she replied:

"I wish to tell you all, and so will begin away back in my girlhood, when I loved Darke Dangerfield."

And she told the story of how Darke Dangerfield had won her love, and then cast her off to marry an heiress, and how she had vowed revenge.

She told of her marriage through pique to his father, Henry Sloan, of how she had engaged Susan Carr, the nurse, to commit a crime and kidnap the child of Darke Dangerfield and his wife, but had been deceived by the nurse; and then she told of a scene that her husband had witnessed in the Dean burying-ground on the ridge near Elmwood Hall, where Dangerfield met her by accident.

"Your father deemed it a meeting between Dangerfield and myself by appointment, my son, when it was purely an accident, and in his jealous rage he waylaid Darke Dangerfield to kill him."

"In self-defense Dangerfield killed him; but that made me even more bitter toward him."

There was one thing that the woman did not confess. She would not tell of her crime against Darke Dangerfield's wife, and that she had been the cause of her death.

"No, I'll not let him think me a deliberate murderess," she decided; and then she went on with her terrible confession, terrible indeed, because it was a mother's confession of sins to a son.

She revealed to him the fact that she had fled from Elmwood to keep him away from Anita Dangerfield. Then followed the coming of Susan Carr, the nurse, now playing the character of the Gold Witch to the ranch, after his departure to the East.

How Susan had tracked her, in disguise. Mrs. Sloan made known, and at last related Susan Carr's story of who she was, her half-sister, and the threat of hate against her and son.

"Poor, driven to bay, and longing for riches for you, my son, while fearful she would kill me or you, or both of us in her hatred, I was utterly desperate, and one night the deadly ordeal came between us."

"It was her hateful, worthless life full of threats, against yours and mine, and I met the issue fairly, fearlessly, without mercy."

"I met it, and I triumphed."

"And she, Susan Carr?" gasped Dare.

"I killed her, and I threw her body into the torrent, so it is now far beneath the mountains," was the husky reply.

"My God!"

And Dare Sloan buried his face in his hands, utterly overcome.

For a long time neither spoke; then the silence was broken by the woman.

"Dare, I have made my confession to you. That awful night of agony, when it was a death-struggle between us, turned my hair as white as snow."

"I put on her costume, and I have tested it several times, at Deadman's Den and before Captain Colorado, with whom I told you she was in league."

"I told him I would sever all connection with him, so sent him away, for I wished not to be a thief."

"I found, behind yonder trunk against the cliff, a cave, and in it is gold which that woman laid by."

"I have not touched a dollar of it, but left it to you to say what to do, for there is a small fortune there."

"Now I wish to remain in these wilds until I die, and you must not desert me, my son, for see, look at my haggard face, and my failing form—I cannot last long."

"When I am gone, bury me in the canyon and go your way, for there is gold there at your command."

"Do you think I would touch her gold, mother?"

"Not after I have sinned to get it for you?"

"No, no, never! I will see that every dollar of it is devoted to some worthy charity, while I will hunt the valleys and hills hereabout for gold that I can come by—" he almost said "without crime," but added, "by my own exertions."

"Do as you deem best, my son, for the world is before you, the past behind me. I but await the end."

"Mother, I will not reproach you. We will live here until I can find a fortune in the mines, which I will work for, and then we will go elsewhere and I will try and make you forget the past as much as possible."

"But now, before we put all this aside, let me tell you of myself, and how I, too, have suffered," and he told of his arrest and trial, of his escape and flight, and that he owed it to Anita Dangerfield that he had not died on the gallows.

Dora Sloan trembled violently, and said nothing until he had told her all. Then she said earnestly:

"God bless Anita Dangerfield, my son, and as I fled with you from her presence, now I would that you could meet again."

Several days after his arrival in the canyon, Dare Sloan went with his mother to Deadman's Den, where the "Gold Witch," as all believed her to be, seemed to be proud in showing her splendid son to the miners of that queer camp.

Often the mother and son were seen together by the miners, seeming to be searching the mountains, streams and valleys for gold, and then came the rumor that Dare Devil, as they called the young man, was on the trail of the road-agents.

"This was true, for Dare had heard so much of the red deeds of Captain Colorado and his men, that he lay in wait for them, hoping to clear the trail of such a band of cruel desperadoes as they had proven to be."

His plan was to lie in wait at a point where they were wont to attack the coach, and then dash out upon them, and in each case the driver and passengers had reported that he had done deadly service.

As the coach ran in to Deadman's Den one evening, and out the next morning, he had a week off duty, but made the time when he was on duty count.

It was on one of his attacks upon the road agents that he had rescued Darke Dangerfield and his daughter greatly to the surprise and delight of Bob Howe, and certainly to the satisfaction of the two passengers, and to their admiration, too, at his daring, in dashing single-handed upon his foes.

CHAPTER XXI.

LAST WORDS.

DARE SLOAN had fired from his ambush upon the road-outlaws, dropping the one who stood by the door of the coach, and had im-

mediately spurred out from his place of hiding as the stage swept on.

He was taken aback slightly as he discovered that Captain Colorado rode out to meet him, while from various places of concealment shots rung out rapidly upon him, showing that the outlaws were out in full force.

Captain Colorado sent a bullet through Dare's left arm, but got one in his brain in return and fell from his horse dead.

Then Dare, rattling forth shots, spurred down the trail in flight, for he saw that he had gotten into close quarters with a dozen men about him. He was wounded in his shoulder and leg slightly, as well as in the arm, and his noble horse seemed to be hard hit, for he staggered under him.

As he dashed around a bend in the trail, while the road-brigands were mounting in hot haste to follow him, he suddenly rode upon a large body of horsemen coming on at a gallop.

Instantly he halted, for he saw that it was a company of cavalry, and called out:

"Come on, captain, for there are road-agents around the bend in pursuit of me."

The officer in the lead called out:

"Ride alongside, sir, and we will charge them!"

Then, around the bend dashed the cavalry directly upon half-a-dozen outlaw horsemen who were starting in pursuit of the bold man who had done them so much harm.

There were sudden shots, saddles were emptied, a cheer and a charge, and the soldiers were upon the scene, with several road-raiders dead and wounded in the trail.

A couple more were captured, and then all assembled around two men who were dying.

Their masks had been torn off, and Dare Sloan cried in amazement:

"Great God! you here, Dean Dangerfield?"

"And you, too, Burton?"

The former lay bruised and bleeding in the trail, he having been the man who had stood at the heads of the lead-horses to the coach, and had been trampled under hoof, while Hal Burton was the one who had approached the stage-door, revolver in hand, for Captain Colorado had hung back to give his new men a trial at highway robbery.

"Yes; and you are Dare Sloan!"

"I recognized you as you rode upon us. I thought you had died upon the gallows, but, thank God, it is not so!"

"No; I escaped, and Dean Dangerfield, I would ask you before these officers and men if you and Hal Burton believe me guilty of the murder of Squire Benson.

"Speak! for you cannot live, for I verily believe you have your death wounds!" and Dare Sloan spoke in a voice intense in its pleading.

Dean Dangerfield glanced toward Hal Burton and answered:

"I'll confess, Hal, for I know I cannot live; and besides, I owe Sloan my life.

"Who is here to write down my confession?"

"Here, Surgeon Wentworth, you take down his dying words, and, Sergeant Lowe, you, Corporal Hain, and two of the men, witness with me what he says," ordered Captain Burr of the Fifth Cavalry.

The men stepped forward, while the surgeon took a pad of paper from his saddle-pocket, along with a pen and ink.

Then the dying man said, in a low voice:

"I, Dean Dangerfield, son of Darke Dangerfield, of Daisy Dell Manor, near N—, State of New York, with the fear of death before my eyes, do solemnly attest that Dare Sloan, accused of the murder of Squire Benson, and tried and convicted as a murderer, is wholly innocent of the crime, as I and Hal Burton are the guilty persons.

"Hal Burton and myself had planned the murder of Squire Benson, who we knew

would return with money, and I fired the fatal shot; but we were surprised by the sound of hoofs, and retreated to the shelter of a tree near by, and, seeing a horseman, rode out and accused him of murder, for we had not the courage to kill him also.

"The pistol we found on the said Sloan was a *fac-simile* to my own, and that aided us in the charge of murder against him, and, to save ourselves from suspicion, we swore his life away."

"Can you sign it?" asked Captain Burr, hoarsely.

"Yes, I must."

And, with a great effort, he did so, saying, as he sunk back:

"Now, Hal, you sign also."

Hal Burton was raised to a sitting posture, and, taking the pen, he wrote:

"I swear this confession is the truth.

"Dare Sloan is guiltless of Squire Benson's murder."

"HENRY BURTON."

"Give me the pen," and Captain Burr hastily wrote the word:

"Witnesses."

Then followed his name. The surgeon signed it, being followed by Sergeant Lowe, Corporal Hain and two private soldiers.

"Do what you can for them, Wentworth, to relieve their suffering," said Captain Burr, and turning to Dare who had stood by, silent and stern, he said:

"Mr. Sloan, I congratulate you, sir, most warmly. I shall see that this confession is sent at once to the judge whom you were tried before, so that your innocence shall be made known.

"And, sir, permit me to say that through you this band of road-agents has been broken up, for we certainly have done good work," and the captain glanced about him.

As they could not bear the wounded away, and they must soon die, the soldiers went into camp to bury the dead meanwhile, and to remain until the following day.

Dare Sloan, as his own horse had succumbed to his wounds, said:

"May I appropriate Captain Colorado's steed, sir?"

"Certainly, but we will appropriate you for the night, as Surgeon Wentworth must look to your wounds."

"Thank you, sir; I will ask the surgeon to be good enough to dress them for me, and then I must go, for my mother lives over in a canyon some half-dozen miles away, and would be anxious if I did not return."

Captain Burr said no more, and called to the surgeon, who soon looked to the wounds of Dare Sloan, none of them fortunately being at all serious, though the one in the arm had bled freely.

"I shall report your good service, Mr. Sloan, and will address you at Deadman's Den, while if you can visit me at the fort I shall be glad to entertain you, I assure you.

"Again I congratulate you upon your escape from hanging for another's crime."

Dare turned away, after expressing his thanks, and went over to where Dean Dangerfield lay.

"The other's dead, sir, and this one cannot last long," announced the sergeant.

"Do you know me now, Dean?" asked Dare in a kindly tone.

The eyes opened slowly and the answer came faintly:

"Yes; but I dare not ask you to forgive me."

"I do forgive you, Dean!"

"Tell sister that. It will please her, for she loves you, Dare. Ask her to forgive me, too. I beg it with my last words."

"I will," was the firm reply, and, grasping the hand of the man who had so cruelly wronged him he knelt by his side and remained there for a long while.

At last he arose, and said:

"Bury him decently, sergeant, in a separate grave, here at the base of this tree," and

he slipped a golden souvenir into the hand of the sergeant, and having transferred his saddle from his dead horse to the splendid animal which had belonged to Captain Colorado, he mounted and rode away in the gathering gloom, for night was approaching.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

THE news of the death of Captain Colorado, and the almost utter annihilation of his band, was carried to Deadman's Den the next day by Captain Burr and his men, who stopped at the Pard's Paradise for breakfast.

Soon after their arrival the story had been spread over the camps, and Darke Dangerfield had asked to see Captain Burr in his own room, for the confession of two men, Burton and Dangerfield, he had heard spoken of.

The captain seemed surprised to find a gentleman of Mr. Dangerfield's appearance, and his lovely daughter, in Deadman's Den, and could but say so; but he told what had occurred, and was deeply pained to see how he wounded the father and sister of the dead outlaw, for they told him what Dean had been to them.

"I shall also write to Judge Verdan and to the attorney of the Benson estate the full particulars of my son's and Burton's confession, Captain Burr, for justice must be at once done that noble young man who has so cruelly suffered at their hands. I shall visit Dare Sloan to day and let him know who it was he saved in the stage-coach yesterday, and that my daughter and myself know all."

"Yes, nothing must be hidden, and, if he has suffered from supposed guilt, we must not shield ourselves now we know who was the guilty one."

"It is just what should be done, Mr. Dangerfield, and I know that Sloan will not suffer at your hands now. He is truly a noble fellow, and I feel deeply for him."

Soon after the captain and his men went on their way, and Darke Dangerfield and his daughter, with a guide, started on horseback for the canyon of the Gold Witch.

The dog on watch signaled their approach, and Dare went to meet them, crossing the stream to where they waited.

He was amazed to see Darke Dangerfield and his daughter in that wild land; but he was quickly led aside by Mr. Dangerfield, who told him that all was known to him, and he then explained just what had happened at Daisy Dell Manor, adding:

"Now, Dean, my boy, you can return home with no dread of a stain upon your good name. You are heir to a great fortune, so need not worry to try and find a fortune in gold among these rugged hills.

"But now, tell me of your poor mother."

Dare Sloan was deeply moved by all that had occurred, but said:

"My mother, sir, is no longer herself. You would not know her, for her hair is as white as snow.

"She seemed to break down rapidly after learning of my trouble, and yesterday took to her bed, from which she says she will never be able to rise."

"My daughter will gladly go to her, and—"

"If she would only see her; but I will go and ask her, if you will wait," and he rode rapidly back to the cabin.

What he said to his mother brought the earnest answer:

"If she would only come to me, for she saved you from the gallows, my son; and then, seeing me as I am, she may forgive me."

"Forgive you, mother?"

"Never mind; I will ask her to forgive me for any sin I may have done against her.

"If she says she will forgive, then I will die content. And, Dare, bring him also, for

with Death's shadow resting upon me, I am not revengeful now."

Rapidly did Dare return to Darke Dangerfield and his daughter, and while they accompanied him to his cabin, the guide camped near to see if he could be of any service to them.

The meeting of the poor woman and those she had wronged, I will not speak of. Let the scene be sacred to them alone.

The next day Anita returned to the Pard's Paradise for their things, and devoted herself to caring for the dying woman.

One week after their coming Dora Sloan died, and was buried in the canyon near her cabin.

Then Dave gave into Mr. Dangerfield's keeping the gold-dust found in the cave, telling him to hold it until he knew what he should devote it to, for he firmly declined to take a dollar of it for his own use.

While Mr. Dangerfield and Anita went to their home in Deadman's Den, Dare Sloan started on his way to his old home in the East, and was welcomed back by Judge Verdan as from the grave.

As the papers proving his innocence had been received, he at once began the settlement of his affairs, and putting Elmwood Hall and Daisy Dell Manor on the market, they were sold, and, with his other inheritance from Squire Benson, he found himself a millionaire.

"I shall never live here again," he said to Judge Verdan as he bade him good-by, one day, six months after his return to his old home.

And he never did, for he went to a Southern State, and on the shores of the Mexican Gulf purchased a lovely home.

And to that home, one year after the arrival of the Dangerfields in Deadman's Den, he carried the lovely and loving Anita as his wife, and thither Darke Dangerfield accompanied them, for they were all he had in the wide world to love and to love him.

THE END.

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